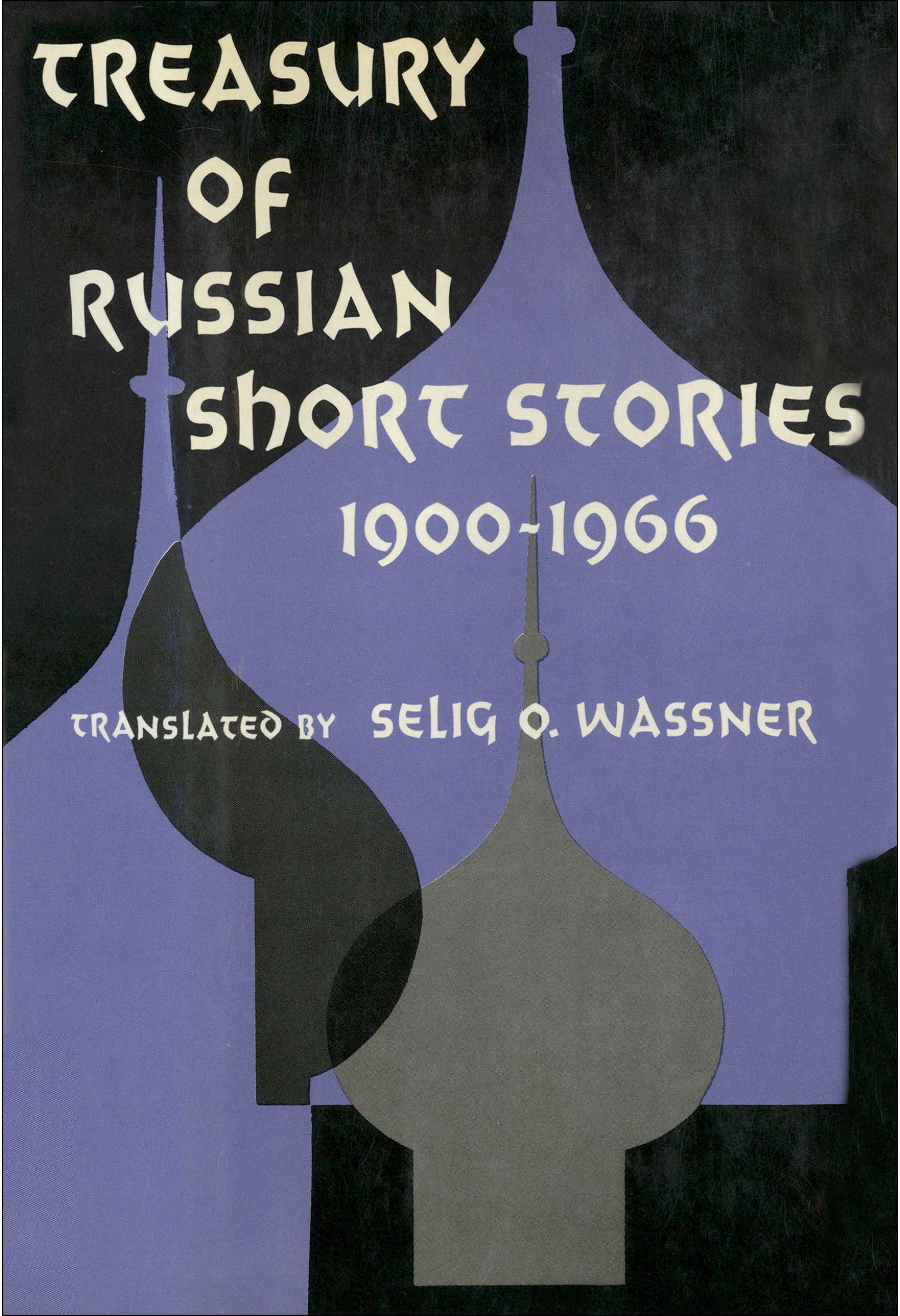
TREASURY OF RUSSIAN SHORT STORIES 1900-1966



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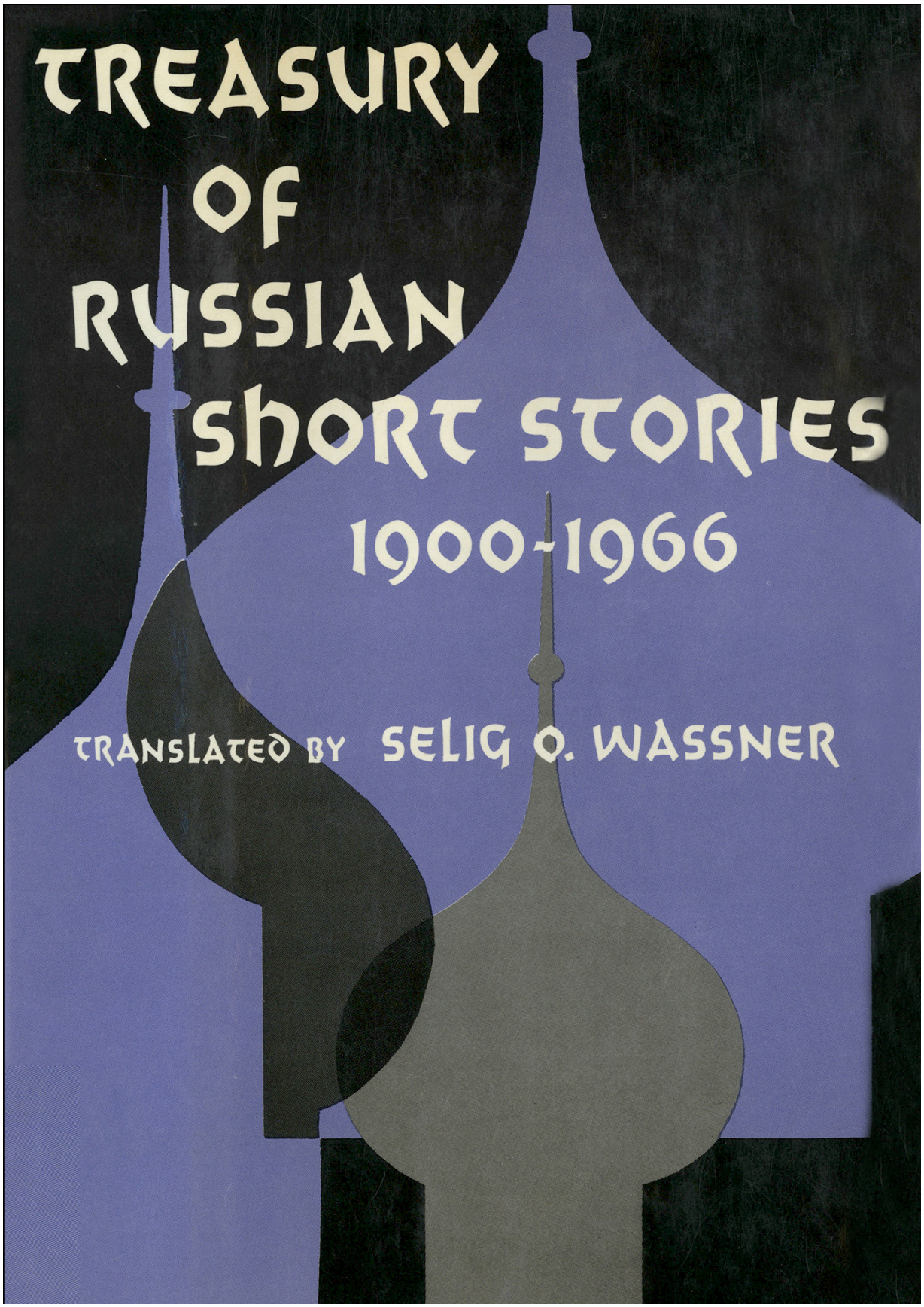
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Treasury of Russian Short Stories

1900 – 1966

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by

Selig O. Wassner

A World of Books That Fill a Need

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To My Wife, Annabel, My Critic And Editor

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Treasury of Russian Short Stories

1900 – 1966

Introduction

If life has a purpose, and if the purpose of literature is to mirror life, then the purpose of my anthology is to project to the English-speaking reader an historical mosaic of the Soviet Union without either ideological glorifications or the anathema of evil. It is neither the paradise of Communist utopia nor the specter of an Orwellian dictatorship that Soviet literature reflects through the nonpolitical fiction of this anthology; it is the progress of the Russian individual thought. And since this fiction, untarnished by propaganda and hitherto untranslated, has not come from sources alien to the Soviet system but from Soviet anthologies, magazines, and books, the voice of protest that rings through its pages strikes with the force of a prayer. It is the universally constant quest for personal self-assertion. Thus the works included in this collection are meant to synthesize (in the words of the Russian song "Vast are you my native land") a comprehensive, honest-to-life kaleidoscopic view of the *kolkhoz* and the city, from the Ukraine to the Far East, and from Georgia to the Arctic Sea.

"Cum tacent clamant" was the Roman motto for passive resistance. The most forceful way for the Russian to express his resistance to the politically repugnant features of the Soviet system was to eschew political problems in literature as if they did not exist. In THE SAFETY INSPECTOR, Vassili Grossman does nothing else but draw a factual picture of a skillful, middle-aged engineer facing an unexpected promotion. There is no overt criticism of the Stalinist regime, but the reader cannot help but wonder whether the frostbites and the bug bites, the pangs of hunger and the sweat of swelter are all an inseparable adjunct of an honest life; and the twist of the story does nothing to dispel the suspicion that Communist society has not learned how to reward conscientious work.

However, the Russian is not a melancholy brute who has resignedly accepted his role as a pawn of the collective according to the precepts of Lenin. Nor is he, for that matter, an intransigent rebel ready to raise a flaming banner against his own state or in the cause of world communism. He is, above all, a nonconformist. He is an individual whose personal

problems are foremost in his mind, who wants to be free to solve them without the state's interference. "I'm I," he insists. "I want to be myself."

I want to be myself! This silent cry of the Soviet man expresses itself with a rhythmic, multifarious consistence. It may be a bird YONDER-WONDER, one wing black the other red which, as a young woman hopes, will come aflying and add color to her life, or a prism, a piece of glass, in which the young scientist Petya Uglow expects to find the missing link he needs to construct a machine to study physiology. The voice of protest culminates in a school principal's CASE OF GEOPHOBIA, a most modern manifestation of an ancient malady afflicting not only the Soviet man but any man who wants to find himself. And the Soviet man wants to find himself and be whole.

An anthology of Soviet literature would not be complete without a juxtaposition of the preceding pre-revolutionary period. I have introduced, therefore, as part of my selection, as a part of a chronological whole, four stories on life in pre-Communist Russia. The first, NIPPIE by Leonid Andreyev, symbolizes Russia before 1905, the midnight of despair. This was hopelessness as black and deep as a fall night and as wild as an abandoned dog's howl.

Russia was a country of despair. It was the despair and the hunger, the physical hunger, of the Russian *muzhik* when he was working for a few kopecks (THE SALTMINE by Maxim Gorki) or when he desperately tried to borrow flour to feed his starving family (THE TWO KINDS OF TRUTH by P. Zamoyski) that served as a mind-opener and the precursor of the great upheaval—the Revolution.

The theme of the Revolution is most eloquently captured by A. Serafimovitch's TWO DEATHS, a touching story of a Russian girl caught in the purgatory of fire and destruction. Then came peace, and the rumbles of the undying class struggle reverberate in ONCE UPON A MORNING by V. Vassilevski. They were cruel, the ex-landlords of old Russia, but look at them now! Is the Soviet man asked to have compassion?

What follows is the Second World War, a topic which has otherwise saturated Soviet literature for the last twenty-six years. In line with my original thought of presenting an historical picture of the Soviet Union as a whole, I chose only two stories relating to the war: THE BIRTHDAY (Panteleyev) and HAPPINESS IS NOT FAR AWAY (Levakovskaya), both treating hostilities from a personal rather than from a national viewpoint. The people, the men and the women, feel and participate in the war in spite of

themselves. Levakovskaya, for one, draws a sympathetic portrait of the enemy who has mercilessly razed the Russian country. It is now and here that individual freedom has emerged from its loud silence into a whisper of why.

Why? As in ME'N MY BIG MOUTH (Podyachev), when the question as to "Why are we fighting this war?" was raised by a Russian peasant, so here the same question is voiced once again—but by a Soviet man through the German soldier. The "cultural thaw" has not set in yet; the voice is no louder than a whisper. But bolder ideas are to come, and personal problems of the average Russian, of the average citizen of the Soviet Union, will find an airing.

Thus, the theme dominating the final part of my selection, the theme made possible by that very whisper of protest, is devoted to casting the Soviet man against the mirror of his state. They are cardinally different problems, the personal problems besetting the triangle in ONE TOO MANY by Kachayev and the poignantly sarcastic husband (or suitor) in GOLDEN MONTH by Safarov; still, these are individual problems which have nothing to do with national conflicts except that they would not have found their *raison d'etre* were it not for the political nature of the Soviet Union. And the political nature of the Soviet Union is changing—because of those problems and because they are mirrored in literature.

The Russia of 1966, the Soviet Union of today, is sixty-six years in time and, perhaps, light years in space removed from the Russia of Leonid Andreyev. Ergo, the NIPPIE of 1900, to use a cliché, is a far cry from THE HOUSE GUEST of 1966.

—Selig O. Wassner

1900

Nippie

by Leonid Andreyev

Leonid Nicolaievitch Andreyev, 1871-1919, impressionist and symbolist. His most recognized works, Red Laugh *(1904) and* In The Fog *(1902) deal with abnormal, and extreme situations: God, evil, fate, death, solitude, and sex. Also wrote plays:* Lazarus *(1906),* Judas Iscariot *(1901). Andreyev never reconciled himself with communism.*

She didn't belong to anybody; she didn't even have a name. Nobody knew where she was spending the long, chilly winters or what she ate. She couldn't get close to the warm cottages for fear of angry watchdogs. Kids would chase her off the streets with stones or sticks, and adults would frighten her with shrill whistles. After darting from side to side, bumping against fences or people's legs, she'd manage to tear away and take cover in a large orchard, in a hideout she knew. There she'd lick her bruises and cherish her ill-will in solitude.

Only once in her life had she been commiserated—by a drunkard who was returning home from a tavern. He was full of love for everybody, full of pity for the whole world. He was mumbling to himself about good people and about all his hopes for them. He also felt sorry for the dirty, homely dog as he happened to cast on her the aimless glance of a drunk.

"Lassie," he called by the name common to all dogs. "Lassie, come khere, don't be afraid."

"Lassie" had loved to get closer. She had wagged her tail, watching the man slap himself on his knee. She hadn't been able to make up her mind, though.

“Come khere, silly. Khonest to God, I won’t khurt you,” the man repeated convincingly.

While the dog had hesitated, wagging her tail fiercely and inching ahead with tiny little steps, the mood of the drunk had changed. He remembered all the ills brought on him by good people; his anguish grew into resentment, and by the time “Lassie” had lain on her back in front of him, he gave her a sweeping kick with the nose of his heavy boot.

That kick had shattered all of “Lassie’s” trust in people. At the mere sight of them she’d either run away with her tail between her legs or snarl. Then one winter she settled under the terrace of a *datcha* which had no watchman and began guarding it for free. At nights she’d run out to the road and bark until she became hoarse. After returning to her lair she’d growl, but there would be pride in her growling.

The winter nights drew on and on; the dark windows of the empty *datcha* stared grimly at the paled, inert orchard behind it. Sometimes a bluish fire seemed to be flaring up inside the house, but that would only be the reflection of a falling star or the sharp-horned moon sending out a timid ray.

2

Spring came; the quiet *datcha* began buzzing with loud voices; wheels squeaked, people clattered bulky things. Vacationers had come from the city, a whole merry crowd of them: adults, adolescents, and children. They became intoxicated with the warm, fresh air. They yelled, they sang, they laughed.

A young girl in a brown school uniform ran out into the orchard to play. She looked up at the clear sky, at the reddish boughs of the cherry trees, then quickly lay down on the grass, facing the pleasant sun. After a while, as unexpectedly, she jumped up, clasped herself, and kissing the spring air with her innocently fresh lips, she solemnly enunciated, “How happy things are!”

She said it and whirled around. At that moment, the dog which had quietly sneaked up to her sank its teeth fiercely into the hem of her inflated skirt. The dog tugged, and in a second vanished again in the thicket of gooseberries and currants.

“You, bad dog,” the girl shouted, running away. For quite some time she was babbling excitedly: “Mama, kids, don’t go into the orchard. There’s a dog, so-o-o big, and b-a-a-d!”

At night the dog stalked back to the sleeping *datcha,* to her lair under the terrace. From the open windows drifted soft sounds of the people’s breathing; they seemed helpless, not scary at all. She watched over them jealously, sleeping with one eye open. With every noise she stretched her head, emitting two motionless, phosphorescent lights from her eyes. There were many alarming sounds in a spring night: minute, invisible things rustled in the grass; last year’s twig crackled under a drowsing bird; on the highway nearby a cart clattered or the wheels of a loaded lorry whizzed. From far away the aromatic odor of fresh pitch spread luringly through the still air into the dawn-brightening distance.

The vacationers were kind people. The wholesome country air, the variety of nature’s hues intensified their kindness. The sun entered them as warmth and left them in the form of laughter—as a cheerful attitude toward everything alive. They got so used to the dog’s barking at night that in the morning they would ask, “Say, where’s our Nippie?”

This new name, “Nippie,” remained with the dog. At first her dark body would appear like a shadow in the bushes and vanish the moment a hand reached out to throw her some food. Gradually, Nippie began to decrease the distance separating her from the people by one step a day. Peering into their faces, she learned their habits; half an hour before lunch she was already standing at the bushes, affectionately wagging her tail, waiting for a morsel. Yet, because of her habit toward moderation grown out of years of tramping, she ate very little. Still she improved: her long hair, which used to hang down in reddish, dry strands, covering her belly with ever-dried mud, became clean, glossy—dark as satin.

Lola, the young girl who had been the first to become acquainted with Nippie, introduced the dog into the happy circle of the vacationing people. “Nippie dear,” Lola called, her hurt forgotten, “come here, please. Nice, dear doggie—come. You want sugar? I’ll give you sugar. Come, please.”

The dog was distrustful; the girl was scared. Yet, patting herself cautiously and talking as softly as any young girl with a melodious voice and a pretty face would, Lola inched up to the dog.

“I like you, Nippie,” she cooed. “I like you very much. You have such a nice little nose, and such expressive little eyes. Don’t you believe me,

Nippie dear?”

There was a wrinkle over Lola’s little nose, a cloud in her expressive eyes, and a frown on her naively charming, sun-blushed face.

For the second time in her life the dog turned over on her back and closed her eyes. She wasn’t sure whether she would be hit or petted. She was petted. A small, warm hand at first hesitantly skimmed her rough head, and having taken Nippie’s acquiescence as a token of unquestionable surrender, it freely and boldly moved over the dog’s shaggy body—jostling, petting, tickling.

“Mama, kids, look. I’m petting Nippie,” Lola spilled over with pride.

When the other fair kids came running—noisy, tinkle-voiced, fast, like droplets of escaping mercury—Nippie was dying from fear and helpless expectation. She knew that if she were hit now, she would not have the strength to sink her sharp teeth into the hand of the offender—her anger was gone. When the children began to pet her in turn, her spine was tingling with a pleasurable sensation almost as painful as the one that hitting brought.

3

Nippie blossomed in all her canine soul. She responded to her name in a precipitate dash, whether from under the terrace or from the green depth of the orchard. She belonged to people and was allowed to serve them. Wasn’t that enough for a dog’s happiness?

The newly found warmth had not fully freed her from fear, however. She’d still be confused at the sight of strange people, visitors. She still accepted every token of fondness as something marvelous to which she couldn’t adequately respond. She had never learned to fawn; other dogs knew how to express their feelings by standing on their hind legs, rubbing against people, or even trying to grin—Nippie didn’t.

The only trick she ever learned was to fall on her back, close her eyes, and whimper softly. But that, she realized, did not convey her grateful enthusiasm and love. Intuitively Nippie began to try to do things she had possibly seen other dogs do. She absurdly turned somersaults, clumsily jumped or twisted around herself, making her lithe body look awkward, pitifully funny.

“Mama, kids, look! Nippie’s playing,” Lola shouted. Losing her breath from laughter, the girl begged: “More, little Nippie, more. That’s the way …”

Everybody gathered around, laughing while Nippie whirled, turned, fell. Nobody saw the strange plea in the dog’s eyes—the plea for warmth. In the past people would shout and whoop to see the dog utterly scared; now they pretended affection to see her make herself ridiculous in her attempts to show love.

“Little Nippie, nice Nippie, show us your tricks,” they kept asking.

Little Nippie would oblige—whirl, turn, fall to the accompaniment of gay laughter. They would praise her in her presence, but express disappointment at her unreasonable fear of people as she would disappear the moment visitors came.

4

Autumn flared up with yellow colors; the sky wept profusely; the *datchas* began to vacate, closing fast like candles doused one after another by torrential gusts.

“What are we going to do with Nippie?” Lola worried. She sat with her arms around her knees, watching sadly as the sparkling drops of rain started to come down the windowpane.

“What pose is that, Lola? Whom are you trying to imitate?” her mother chided. “What can we do? We’ll have to leave her here, what else?”

“I feel so-o-o sorry for her,” Lola chanted.

“What can we do, dear? We have no yard; we can’t keep her in the apartment. You understand that?”

“I feel so-o-o-rry,” Lola was almost in tears. She sorrowfully wrinkled her lovely nose.

“The Dogayevs have been offering me a puppy for a long time,” her mother soothed. “They say it’s a pure breed, and already trained. Do you hear me? This one here is nothing but a mongrel.”

“I feel so-o-o-rry,” Lola reiterated tearlessly.

Again strangers came to the house, again lorries squeaked and floor boards groaned under the heavy steps of porters. But there was less talk this time and no laughter at all. Vaguely sensing trouble, Nippie ran off to the

border of the orchard and watched intently through the thinned shrubbery as those strange people in red shirts were bustling in her corner of the terrace.

"That's where you are, my poor little Nippie," Lola stooped down to pet her. She was already dressed in traveling clothes, in a black blouse and that brown skirt from which Nippie had torn a piece. "Come with me," Lola suggested.

They went to the highway. It was raining on and off. The whole space between the darkened earth and the sky was filled with curling, rapidly moving clouds. From the ground they looked like a wall firmly saturated with moisture, repelling light and condemning the sun to loneliness.

To the left of the highway, a field of grey stubble stretched into the hills of the near horizon where trees and bushes rose here and there in lonely clusters. Straight ahead, near the gates of a tavern with a red, iron roof, a group of people were teasing the village idiot.

A yellow, anemic sunray pierced the clouds; it appeared to be coming from an incurably sick sun. The autumn distance shrouded in fog seemed to be widening and saddening.

"It's dreary here, Nippie," Lola whispered. Without looking back she turned around.

Only in the waiting room of the railway station did she remember that she hadn't said goodbye to Nippie.

5

After the people left, Nippie was sniffing at their footprints for some time. She came running to the station only to return drenched and dirty to the *datcha.* There she performed a new trick nobody had ever seen before—for the first time she went up onto the terrace, and rising on her hind legs, she looked into the glass door. She scraped with her paw—no response.

The rain began coming down harder. The murk of the long fall night moved in from all directions. Creeping out noiselessly from the bushes and pouring down from the sky, it rapidly filled the empty *datcha.* The light still wrestled for some time with the darkness upon the glowing footprints of dirty boots before it, too, finally surrendered.

Night came.

Then, when the dog had no more doubts about its arrival, she voiced a mournful, loud howl. It was a howl of despair, ringing and sharp, which

intruded into the monotonous, grimly subdued murmur of the rain. The howl cut the darkness and died, drifting over the black, naked fields.

The dog howled in an evenly insistent but hopelessly calm voice. Whoever had heard must have thought that the spirit of the night was moaning, striving toward the light, reaching out toward a warm, bright fire of a loving heart.

The dog howled and howled. …

1900

The Saltmine

by Maxim Gorky

Maxim Gorki, 1868-1936, born Alexei Maximovitch Peshkov, probably the foremost Russian short story writer, novelist, and playwright of the twentieth century. After losing his parents as a young child, he was raised by his grandparents. Left home at the age of twelve to wander, mostly on foot, over Russia for more than a decade and work at various odd jobs. His first short story, Makar Chudra, *appeared in 1892. His autobiographical trilogy,* Childhood, in the World, *and* My Universities, *is considered one of his best literary creations.*

"Go to the 'brine,' man," the grizzled old fisherman spat aside before scanning the blue sea horizon. "Go, man, you'll have no trouble getting a job there … no trouble," he spat again through clenched teeth.

"Why are you so sure?" I asked. I had spent the night in the old man's mud hut, and now, sitting in its shade, I watched my host lazily mending canvas pants.

"Why?" he drawled, "'cause they come and go there. It's murder, you can't last long—not many do. You want to try?"

"What's the pay, do you know?"

"Seven pennies a barrow—like as not that's enough for a day's chow. You think you'll make seven barrows till sundown?"

"I don't know," I hesitated.

"Go on, man, take a stab at it. If you can't stomach it, come back here to rest. You'll tell me all about it. It's not far from here—a mile or so. Follow

the shore and you can't miss it."

I listened for a while to the melancholy melody he was mumbling into his beard, then thanked him for his hospitality and took off. It was a hot August morning; the sky was bright and clear, the Black Sea was serenely deserted. Greenish waves rolled one after another onto the sand with plaintive splashes. Ahead, in the bluish mist loomed white spots—the town of Otchakoff. Behind me the hut seemed to be sinking into the bright-yellow sand dunes.

Soon before my eyes unfolded the panorama of the "brine"—three square areas, each about five hundred yards long, marked off by low embankments and narrow ditches—the three stages of salt mining. The first one had been full of seawater. Now the salt was settling by evaporation into a pale-grey layer, shining with a pinkish tint. In the second area the salt was being scraped into heaps—women with shovels, stumping knee-deep in glistening, black silt moved about listlessly, without shouting or chattering. As I reached the third square, I saw men doubled up over wheelbarrows, carting loads of the greasy silt in grim silence. The wheels were whining, as if trying to convey to heaven the vexed protestations of the long file of human backs.

"Spill it to the left, to the left you dirty bastards," a deep, gruff bass suddenly boomed above the monotonous screeching of barrows. That had been the foreman. He was a tall man, hair black as coal, dressed in a blue denim shirt and white, wide slacks. He had climbed on a tall heap of salt, waving a shovel and barking orders at the top of his lungs while the laborers were wheeling up their loads to him on a raised plank.

"You lame-brain," he cursed, mopping off his sweat-covered face with his shirt-tail. "Where the hell are ya shovin'? How would ya like t'get the spade between your peepers?" Not waiting for a reply, he rapped the salt heap with his shovel, poured on it water from a bucket, and smoothed it. As the laborers, like zombies, wheeled their barrows up to him, discharging them to his commands "to right, to left," the foreman was building his salt into an oblong pyramid.

"Move faster," he blared. The stolidly silent workers, one after another, first straightened out their sore backs, then turned around with stubbornly pursed lips. Heavy-footed, they dragged their empty, less squeaky barrows down another greasy, silt-coated plank to bring more salt.

I watched. The wheel of a barrow skidded from the plank—into the mud. Those ahead moved on, those behind stared indifferently at their companion as he was struggling to raise the wheel of the quarter-ton barrow back onto the plank.

Another few minutes, and I decided to try my luck. Assuming as nonchalant an expression as I could muster, I approached the plank on which the workers were coming down with empty carts.

“Hello there, need a hand?” I cheerfully exclaimed.

The response was quite unexpected. The first man—a grey-haired, vigorous old-timer, with pants tucked up above his knees, boasting a tanned, sinewy body—went by without deigning to give me a look. The second—a young lad with light-brown hair and grey, hostile eyes—gave me a hateful glance, made an ugly mug, and in addition threw in a hefty curse. The third man—apparently Greek, with curly hair, black as a beetle—pulling alongside me voiced regret that his hands were rather busy, that he could not welcome me with his fist in my nose. Yet his threat sounded sincerely empty. When the fourth man came by, he gibed at me at the top of his lungs: “Hello, glassy four-eyes.”

Never before had I been subjected to such a brusque reception, or “discourteous welcome,” as they call it in cultured society. Discouraged, I mechanically removed my glasses and made a few steps toward the foreman now standing at the parapet in front of a shed.

“You, there,” he called. “What d’ya want? Don’t tell me a job?”

“Why not?”

“Do you know your way with barrows?”

“I carted dirt.”

“Dirt! No good, dirt is not the same as salt. Here you cart salt, not dirt. Go back to your pigs, peasant! And you, Nightmare,” the foreman turned to a frayed giant, “pile right at my feet!”

Nightmare, a scalplocked Ukrainian with a long, greying moustache, a livid, pimply nose, drew a deep, resonant breath and upset the wheelbarrow. The salt spilled out; the Scalplock swore, the foreman cursed back at him. Both smiled at each other, and both, at the same time, turned their attention to me.

“You still here?” the foreman asked.

“You, Moscow, maybe you come to saltmine to eat blintzes?” the Scalplock winked at the foreman.

I pleaded with the foreman to give me a job. “I’ll get used to it,” I assured him, “and will cart as good as anybody.”

“Yeah? We shall see,” the foreman tried to size me up. “O.K., it’s your funeral. Mind you, the first day I won’t tally ya more than four bits. Hey, somebody give him a barrow.”

From somewhere emerged a fellow, short, barefoot, dressed in nothing but a shirt. His legs were tied around up to his knees with dirty rags. “O.K., let’s go,” he muttered, scowling at me.

He led me to a pile of wheelbarrows stacked up one on top of the other. As I was about to pick one, he suddenly interrupted his leg-scratching. “Don’t ya see the wheel’s crooked?” he scolded. Then having had his say, Shortie indifferently moved away and lay on the ground.

I chose another barrow and got in line to fetch salt. A vague, heavy feeling pressing inside me prevented me from speaking to my fellow workers. In spite of the harrowing fatigue, their faces expressed a blunt, though still restrained hostility. I wondered whether the burning sun was at fault, or the caustic “brine,” or both. The men had seemed to resent everything around them.

I barely managed to enter the square and turn my wheelbarrow along one of the criss-crossedly lain boards leading to the heaps of salt when a blow struck my foot from behind.

“Pick up your heels, you skinny sonofabitch,” the Scalplock snarled at me.

I began to shovel.

“Fill it full,” he ordered.

I filled it as much as it could take. “Out with it,” I heard them yell. I had noticed that before anyone of them budged his wheelbarrow, he’d first spit into his hands, groan, bend over his load at almost a straight angle, then stretch out his body, crane his neck, and give another groan. I tried to do the same. I lifted the handles; the wheel squeaked, my collar bones creaked, and my hands—tense to their last tendons—quivered. I staggered, made a step, two. I reeled, first to the left, then to the right. It jerked me … the wheel ground off the plank … I flew over the barrow, face-down, into the mud. The barrow followed, thumping me on the seat of my pants with

authority, before lazily turning its own bottom up. A deafening clamor of shouts, jeers greeted my fall. The noise seemed to push me deeper into the tepid, greasy "brine."

"Friend, give me a hand," I begged my neighbor, the Scalplock, as I was struggling to lift the mud-plastered barrow. In reply he laughed uproariously, clutching at his stomach, reeling from side to side.

"Oh, what'sa bumblin' ninnie! You want your mommie, ninnie? Climb up on tsa plank, bend tsa coach to tsa left … Mommie, he cries—Tsa brine shott sok you in." Again, clasping his sides and croaking, he burst into spasms of laughter until his eyes were full of tears.

"To hell with ya," the grey old-timer grunted devastatingly, as he took off with his barrow. Those waiting behind me stared malevolently at my travails. Nobody had offered a helping hand.

"Out of my way," the Scalplock thundered by with his barrow, almost taking my ear off.

I was left alone. Somehow I managed to drag out the barrow, push out of the square, and get myself another one.

"I see, friend, you've had a spill? Well, it happens to everybody at first." I looked in the direction of the voice. Behind a heap of salt squatted a lad of about twenty, sucking the palm of his hand, smiling at me. "Don't mind it, friend," he nodded, "it's only because you ain't got used to it yet."

"What's wrong with your hand?" I asked.

"Scratched it; now it's festerin'. If you don't suck it out quick, you may say goodbye to your job. But, friend, get on with your work, the foreman will be mad …"

I got on. With the second barrow there were no mishaps. I carted the third, fourth, and two more. My fellows workers seemed to ignore me; ordinarily such treatment would have upset me, but not now.

"Break it up," somebody yelled. "Chow time."

There were sighs of relief but no overt joy. Everything was done reluctantly, as if there would be nothing pleasant in resting. My back, legs, arms ached. Still, trying not to let on, I walked briskly toward the food kettle.

"Hold it," the grim, old vagabond stopped me. His tattered blue fatigue shirt matched in color his livid, worn-out face, accentuated by frowning,

thick brows. “Hold it,” he repeated, glowering at me with red, inflamed eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Maxim.”

“So your father was an idiot if he gave you a name like that. We ain’t allowing any Maxims to eat from our kettle the first day on the job. Maxims got to work the first day on their own chow. That’s how it is here. See, if your name was Ivan or Stefan, that’s different … Take my name, it’s Matvey; so I’ll have my meal now, but Maxims may just watch. Scram from the kettle, Maxim.”

I backed away, staring at him in disbelief. I was baffled by their attitude; I hadn’t provoked it at all—I had never experienced anything like it. Any time I’d walk into a shop I’d always be able to fall in on a friendly footing with everybody. But here?

They ate, belched, and went to have a smoke away from the kettle. The Scalplock and Shortie came to me, sitting down and blocking with themselves the row of barrows left on the planks.

“Now what, chum?” the Scalplock inquired. “Would you like a smoke?”

“Gimme one,” I demanded.

“Why don’t ya roll your own?”

“If I had I’d not have asked you,” I growled.

“True! Smoke,” he handed me his shag pouch. “What’ll ya do, go on cartin’?”

“Sure, as long as I can.”

“Fine. Where ya from?”

I told him.

“Uh-huh. Tell me, is tsat far?”

“About three thousand kilometers from here.”

“Oh-ho, khood far … Why you come here?”

“The same reason as you, I guess.”

“Ah ha, you too was chased out for tsievin’?”

“How’s that?” I sensed that I’d stepped into a trap.

“Tsat’s because I come here ’cause my village chased me out for tsievin.’ You say you come for same reason … So,” he laughed hilariously, pleased with his wittiness.

His comrade winked at him and smirked.

“Wait a moment,” I tried to argue.

“No time t’wait, chum—have to work. Let’s khow, you—right behind me.”

I was about to take my barrow when he offered eagerly: “Let me, I’ll take it,” and before I could object, he lifted my barrow, by its body, threw it into his, and pushed. “We’ll khive it a ride,” he roared.

His helpfulness made me suspicious. Walking beside him, I tried to scrutinize the wheels-up barrow but couldn’t discover anything wrong with it. Yet I knew I had become the object of general attention once more. I noticed the other workers were winking at each other, nodding in my direction, and whispering—awkwardly trying to be sly about it. I became wary, though I had no idea what to expect.

“Here we are,” the Scalplock declared, hauling out my barrow and setting it in front of me. “Start shovelin,’ chum.”

I looked around. Everybody seemed to be working industriously. I, too, started to shovel. There was a kind of heavy silence pressing on my chest, as nothing was heard but the rustle of spilling salt. “This place is not for me,” I decided.

“What’s the matter, you asleep?” livid, Matvey snapped at me. He gave me a contemptuous look and moved out his barrow.

I clasped the handles, heaved slowly, and thrust ahead. Suddenly, an excruciating pain! It shot through the palms of my hands … It spread like fire. I screamed wildly. I hurtled away the barrow and pulled my hands back. The pain was unbearable; gnashing my teeth I looked at my palms—a large area of the skin was in shreds. Oh, what animals! They had split the sides of the handles with an axe and wedged the slits with splinters. When I had clasped the handles the splinters had sprung out, the wood had snapped, pinching the skin and tearing it off. I slowly lifted my head; a mass of faces, distorted in their perverse cheerfulness glared at me. Shouts, jeers, whistles, flying at me from all directions, drowned the vulgar curses of the foreman that had been drifting from the parapet. My tormentors began to crowd me, heaping on me ridicule and insults. I gazed in bewilderment—why? A feeling of fury began to boil inside me, turn into hate, into a desire for revenge. I was beginning to burn with a passion, an aching passion to outdo them, humiliate them.

“You wretches,” I clenched my fists. Snarling insults as vile as theirs, I daringly stepped forward, to fight, fight …

They wavered … they began to retreat. Only the giant scalplocked Ukrainian and livid Matvey stood their ground. The Scalplock was tucking up his sleeves.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered happily, glowering at me.

“Give him a rap on the kisser, Havrila,” Matvey eagerly recommended.

“Why did you do it?” I screamed. “What did I do to you? Am I not a human being as you?” I went on raving pitifully—words full of nonsense—shaking from insane rage. If I had expected them to play another mean trick on me, I was wrong—dumb-struck faces were staring at me. I realized that the awareness of guilt had suddenly dawned upon them. Matvey had lost his aplomb, and even the Scalplock had pulled down his sleeves and plunged his hands into his pockets.

“Why don’t you tell me?” I insisted, waving my arms at them.

Their reply was stony silence. The Scalplock stared at his feet while rolling a cigaret. Matvey had managed to join the rear of the crowd. The men began to go for their barrows, scratching in grim silence. The foreman had come to the group, vituperating, gesturing menacingly. But I wanted answers. The bitter feeling of undeserved hurt with which I was left only served to intensify the pain in my hands. “Wait a moment, chums,” I shouted.

They halted, scowling, silent.

“I’ve got to know, chums, why did you do it? Have you any conscience?”

Nothing but silence. What could they say? There was another awkward pause, before I addressed them once more, in a much calmer tone of voice. “Chums,” I said, “I am a human being—the same as you. I, too, want to eat, and that’s why I came here. I trusted to find akin people, equal to me by our common, miserable station in life. And what do I get?”

“We are all alike,” I emphasized several times. “We ought to understand each other; we ought to help each other as much as we can …”

They had gathered around me, listening attentively, though avoiding my pleading glances. After a while, as I scanned some faces of the crowd, I noticed that my sermon had taken effect. They had seemed contrite. A

feeling of joy, acute and glowing, overwhelmed me. I threw myself upon a heap of salt and burst into tears. Yes, I cried …

An hour passed, maybe two, when I raised my head I saw that the day's work was about done. The workers, sitting at the parapet in clusters of five to six people, were silhouetted against the setting sun and the pinkish salt background like ungainly, big blotches. Chilly air had begun to waft in from the sea. A little, white cloud sailed across the sky, shedding thin, transparent wisps. Soon they evanesced into the deep, blue yonder.

When I got up I had made up my mind: I'd take my leave and return to the fisherman's hut. When I approached the group consisting of the Scalplock, Matvey, the foreman, and three other stout vagabonds, they all rose to meet me. "Friend," Matvey rasped before I had a chance to say a word, "you better go your way, wherever it is. Correct. As a go-away present we collected a few pennies for you." His head was bowed, as he reached out his arm to me.

In his trembling hand he had a bunch of coppers. Stepping from foot to foot, the others somberly glanced in all directions but at me. First I had been staring at them in confusion; then I realized that they were impatient to see me go.

"No, keep 'em," I pushed Matvey's hand aside.

"You better take'm, friend, don't offend us. We ain't that bad if you stop to think of it. We know, pal, we've done you wrong. Was there any reason for it, you'd ask? No, absolutely none. Life itself is the reason. What kind of life do we have? A dog's life is better'n ours. A barrow, a quarter of a ton; the brine chews up our legs, the sun burns us like fire the whole day—and what's a day? Four bits, or five! Ain't that enough to turn a man into a beast? You toil and toil, you drink your wages away, and you come back to toil some more. That's all to it! You waste five years of your life and find you've lost all your human dignity—you've become a fiend. We wrong each other, chum, more than we wronged you. Yet, we know each other, whereas you're a stranger. Why should we pity you? Sure, some of this and that. Sure, you told us a few things—so what? Sure, you put them smartly there … Of course, it was all true, but it's neither here nor there. So, go on wherever you want,—you with your brand of truth, and we'll stay here with ours. It isn't healthy for you to stay. We here stick to each other like flies to flypaper—be glad you can still fly away. Scat! Take the coppers and

goodbye, pal. We ain't guilty to you nor are you to us. It just cannot turn out well. Goodbye, chum, shove your way."

I pored over their faces; they were nodding in agreement with Matvey. "So long, pals," I tossed my bundle over my shoulder.

"Hold it, man," the Scalplock's heavy hand stopped me by the arm. "If tsat was not you but somebody else, I'd chase him out wits my fists. Und'stand? But you—even some pennies you have for present. So why don't ya tsank us?" He spat aside and began to twirl his tobacco pouch around his finger, grinning victoriously, as if to say, marvel at me, see how clever I am!

Crushed by the day's events, I hastened to thank them and take my leave. I felt painful and ashamed. The sky had lost its swelter, but the deserted sea hadn't stopped rolling its greenish surf. As the murmuring waves serenely sparkled at the setting sun, the surf seemed to be conversing about things incomprehensible and melancholy.

When I approached the hut, the old fisherman rose to meet me. "Well, pal, have you found it salty?" he asked in the triumphant voice of a man whose opinions proved to be right.

I looked at him in silence.

"Uhm, a bit too salty, huh?" he decided, examining me from head to foot. "Grab some food, get yourself a bowl of chowder. They made a potful of it; half of it, like as not, is left. Go on, but blow on the spoon. Dee-ee-licious chowder, it is—with flounder and sturgeon."

Two minutes later I was sitting again in the shade of his mud hut. I was dirty, exhausted, and very hungry. My heart ached, yet I ate, and ate. The chowder with sturgeon and flounder tasted good.

1927

The Two Kinds of Truth

by Pyotr Zamoyski

Pyotr Ivanovitch Zamoyski, 1896-1958, born Zevalkin, of a poor peasant family. Self-taught, he did all kinds of work, wrote mostly about village life. Under the influence of Gorki wrote a biographical trilogy, Stripling, Youth, *and* Sunrise.

"What's he doin' so long?" my mother said, unable to tear herself away from the window.

"They won't give him none," Mishka told her in a quiet voice. "Why go to them at all?" he added after a moment of silence.

All of us, a roomful of kids clinging to the window, gazing impatiently toward the school and those white willows, trying to picture that nine-walled Glazov house where our father had gone to borrow some rye flour. The Glazovs weren't the first; yesterday he had made the rounds of all "benefactors" as he called them, those who "help out" the needy, lend a measure of rye and take back a measure-and-a-half in the fall. But today all those "benefactors" seemed to be in cahoots; my father was refused by each one of them. The Glazovs were his last straw; old Glazov was a God-fearing man, as my dad was, and they'd meet almost every Sunday in church on the left choir loft where they sang together.

"He'll give, Uncle Ossip will," Mom said. "They've lots of grain, all shelves full."

"They'll first've their teeth pulled," Mishka growled.

All of us kids, except Mishka who was the oldest now, kept clinging to the window, staring at those willows and waiting. We hoped something

would suddenly begin to move in those willows and come away onto the road, and then we'd see that it was our daddy, and our daddy'd have a bag on his back … What would our dad have on his back, one bag full of rye or full of nothing? That's what it was all about.

Did Mother really believe when she said that Uncle Ossip won't refuse? She probably didn't because her face was worried and her eyes were scared. There were nine mouths to feed in our family and they'd given us soil for one-and-a-half souls. Only my dad had the right to soil and our oldest brother, now in the army. My dad was one soul and the soldier boy one-half; we kids didn't count—we were "soulless" they said. That had been the law, and after the law was made there was no more soil to share out; we couldn't rent land either for half-and-half because we had no horse and no seeds.

As Dad used to say, we had to knock like fishes against the ice, trying to break it.

"Is it him?" Mom shouted out and her face became pale. We all saw him. We looked at each other and quietly came down from the bench. Sitting near Mom, I could hear her sniffing into her apron. She's crying, I thought, and a mist came over my eyes. I was sorry for her but I knew if I ever tried to ask her not to, she'd cry even harder and what's more, she'd begin to sob aloud, and then she'd wake up Aksutka in the chamber, and I'd have to rock her, pick her up and carry her. So I decided, let Mom cry … Maybe I'll cry a little too—quietly—because a twelve-year-old boy isn't supposed to cry aloud …

Though we weren't looking at the street any more we knew by the passing shadow that Dad was home. We could see him now standing at the door of our cottage. He groaned for a while, fumbling and knocking at something, then began to scrape, as if groping for the cramp. There was a jerk, and then … the door opened slowly, slowly.

Dad didn't look at us, at our worried faces. He lazily laid the empty bag. on the Dutch stove we had, rubbed his hands as if they had been frozen, and only then did he give us a glance—sort of begging and scared too. It seemed as if Dad was afraid of us, his own kids. He was afraid and felt guilty. None of us said anything, and there was silence for a long time which Dad seemed to find harder and harder to stand. We all knew that Mom would be first to speak up. She lifted her tearful face, chewed for a while on her dried-up lips and began to shake her head.

“You’re nothing but a piece of clay,” she said bitterly to Dad. Mom was speaking very softly but we all heard her … he too. “You’re a good-for-nothing goofy nincompoop unfit even to be shot by a good cannon. Why don’t we get rid of you before you tire us all out to death?” Mom kept scolding Dad and us. Dad didn’t say anything; he knew that if he said something they might end fighting with the wooden poker. So he just shook his head and whispered, “Oh, you stupid nag, you nag!”

When Mom finished scolding she got up from the bench, made a step toward the stove, and snatched the bag. Giving Dad a look that almost made him stagger, she slammed the door and left.

I ran after and caught up with her at the pantry shed. “Mommie, where’re you going?” I asked.

She stopped and stared at me. Then she bent down as if looking for a stick but I didn’t wait. “You miserable brat,” I heard her scream. “Go home before I make a short end of you.”

I ran back. I knew where she was going anyhow—to the Karpukhins. The Karpukhins were richer than the Glazovs but more stingy. Dad wouldn’t even try there; only Mom had a chance. Mom knew how to go about these things; she’d not crawl or bow as Dad did. No, she’d pretend to laugh, joke and wouldn’t ask for anything at first. Only later she’d say, as if it suddenly came to her, “Heck, I just thought of something. I’d started on the dough and found I haven’t got enough flour. Heck, could you help me out with a measure until tomorrow?”

The Karpukhins knew only too well that “tomorrow” meant until fall. Still only rarely did they refuse Mom. True, they’d first make fun out of Dad, out of our whole household, our misery, and then they’d either give right away or promise to.

I hadn’t gone with Mom to the Karpukhins this time, nor did I even follow to watch her through the window. Too often she’d catch me and give me a few on the behind. But I waited until I saw her come out of the Karpukhins’ porch. I knew from her face that she got it.

“Mom?” I asked softly, “are we going to get it?”

“We are,” she said.

“When?”

“Don’t be nosy,” she snapped. “They’re takin’ a lorry to the mill tomorrow an’ after they come back they’ll give us two measures till New

Moon."

I ran inside. When Mom came in everybody knew by her face that we were going to have bread. Even Dad cheered up though he asked no questions.

Only Mishka was glum. He sprawled with his elbows all over the table and pressed his hands to his temples. Mishka was thinking, but I paid no attention to him because all I thought of was that we were going to have bread. I was so happy that I felt like running out into the meadow to watch the grazing horses at the mill or play with other kids my age. They were burning cow dung and baking potatoes in it.

I stopped at the threshing floor and peeked into our neighbor's hut where I liked to sit and think. I don't know how long I was sitting there when I heard somebody come by in a hurry. I looked: it was my brother Mishka. In one hand he had a blue sackcloth bundle, in the other he carried a thick stick.

"Mish," I shouted at him. "Where're you going?"

He turned around and yelled back at me, a little too happily: "To wild geeses, to pieces, and misty hills—that's where. Don't say a word, though, to Dad or Mom," he warned.

"If you say so," I promised, my heart aching. My older brother was going to find his luck in neighboring villages. As my eyes followed him sadly, I was beginning to be afraid that Mishka'd never come back to us. I remembered him telling me, "Vasya, some day I'm going to go where my eyes'll carry me. I'm tired of looking after people's cows and begging for little handouts. You'll grow up and go away too. We've got no roots in this village, the Tsar gives us no soil, and there's nothing here to cling to."

There he went, my older brother, and now there was nobody to talk to and tell my troubles. I wanted to run after him when somebody called me. It was Lukashka, taking a cart out into the fields. I had completely forgotten about him—I still did have a friend! Lukashka was from Kochki, not far from here; he was living in our village now, working for the rich farmer Damyotka. Several years older than me, Lukashka was a strong lad and a good worker. He had only one good eye, though; the other a shepherd had spattered out with a whip.

Lukashka had been telling me interesting things and giving me books to read. Whenever I had a chance to crawl up into the attic, I'd sit down at the

chimney where there was a hole in the roof and read. Mom couldn't find me there, no matter how hard she looked. I knew if she ever found me there she would take my book away and tear it to pieces.

"Where're you going?" Lukashka asked.

"Oh, wherever my eyes go," I said. "Just seen my brother off."

"Into the world?"

"Where else," I sighed.

"I'm afraid Mishka won't come back to you," Lukashka shook his head.

"I'm afraid so," I agreed.

"Get on the cart," Lukashka invited me.

I jumped up. "Your brother's going to get far, far away," Lukashka went on. "He'll get into a big town with all kinds of houses and tall chimneys. He'll hire himself out to work in some factory and never come back into this village."

"No, he won't," I nodded. My heart pained me and I didn't want to think of it. I looked at the two-share plough dragging behind us on its gauge wheels, then watched Lukashka's huge dog Kaukas, running ahead of the cart. Kaukas was big and yellow, came out on top in most dog fights. And Lukashka loved to see dogs fight; he'd seem to change when he sicked them. "Sick'em Kaukas!" he'd yell, and Kaukas'd throw himself at his enemy from a running jump.

We barely managed to get by two boundary stones from the meadow when a two-horse cart showed up on the road crossing. It was driven by Pavel, one of Karpukhin's married sons. Pavel was older than Lukashka but he always liked to ride out into the fields with *his* dog, the huge Polkan. He too loved to see dogs fight. His Polkan had already been in many fights with Lukashka's Kaukas; sometimes one, sometimes the other dog won.

"Hello there, Lukashka," Pavel shouted.

"Hello there, Pavel. Opening the fall tilling?"

"Some people've started already."

"My landlord's sending *me* out," Lukashka explained.

The dogs were already snarling at each other. Pavel's eyes began to flash. "Look at them," he shouted with joy.

"They know their business," Lukashka said.

"Shall we sick'em, what d'ya say?" Pavel asked.

"Why not?"

They stopped their horses and jumped off the carts. “G-get’im, Polkan!” Pavel shouted.

“Take’m, Kaukas!” Lukashka yelled.

The dogs seemed to be waiting just for that; they jumped at each other, turned over a few times, and bunched in a cloud of dust. Each dog had his own way of fighting; Polkan tried to grab his enemy’s throat. Kaukas aimed for the upper lip. The winner would usually be the dog that made the first grab.

This time Kaukas had goofed. Almost at once Polkan had his throat. Whooping happily, Pavel kept running around the dogs, baiting Polkan, “G-et’im!”

Lukashka, too, ran around, yelling, “Take’m, Kaukas! Take’m!”

The dogs whirled, uprooting grass and crushing somebody’s millet. Kaukas was pressed to the ground, his throat in Polkan’s teeth. He had stopped growling, whined for a while, then began to groan hoarsely.

I sat on the cart, trembling from fright and watching little rivers of sweat flowing down Lukashka’s face. Kids had come hurrying down from the meadow, and they too, like Pavel and Lukashka, started running around the dogs, whistling and yowling.

Kaukas was quiet and all bloody as Polkan was sitting on top of him, biting his throat. “Lukashka,” I yelled out. *“Do* something, he’ll chew Kaukas to death.”

Lukashka had seen that. He made up his mind to do the last thing he’d have wanted to. Running up to the dogs, he kicked Kaukas as hard as he could. “S-sick’ im,” he shouted “S-sick’ im!”

Kaukas shot up like a flash of lightning. Before I could blink an eye he was on top of Polkan, clamping him with his paws and sinking his teeth in his enemy’s upper jaw. There was Polkan’s scared yap, as Kaukas tossed him up and threw him against the plough, and then clamped him again with his paws, tearing at his side and throwing off bloody clumps of hair.

Pavel became pale and began darting around the wrestling dogs. “Get’im,” he kept yelling, kicking Polkan, but Polkan couldn’t tear himself away from Kaukas’ teeth. Then Pavel grabbed a stick and began to hit Kaukas, which was something a dog baiter wasn’t supposed to do, because when the owners wanted to separate the dogs they had to beat their own.

“Mister Pavel,” Lukashka shouted, “Why’re you hitting *my* dog?”

“Shut up,” Pavel shouted back, hitting Kaukas harder and harder.

“Stop hitting my dog,” Lukashka screamed, trying to take away the stick from Pavel. But Pavel swung around and hit Lukashka on the face with it. Lukashka’s nose began to bleed. He wanted to pull the stick out of Pavel’s hand and hit him back with it but Pavel grabbed his hand and struck him a few more times on the face.

“Mister Pavel,” Lukashka began to cry. “Why’re you hitting me?” He turned around to the kids who had been watching. You’ll witness that he hit me,” he said. “I’m going to complain to the village constable.”

Pavel started to cow the kids. “Have you seen me hitting him?” he asked. “You haven’t, right?”

The kids were scared. “No, we haven’t!” they said running away.

“You little cowards,” Lukashka shouted angrily, smearing the blood over his face. “You’re afraid to testify against a rich man, you! I don’t care, I’ve a witness anyway.”

“And who’s that?” Pavel sneered.

“Him,” Lukashka pointed at me.

Pavel looked at me calmly. “Will you witness?” he asked.

“I will,” I answered in a voice trembling from fear and anger.

“Go on,” Pavel shouted. “Go on. What’re you going to tell the constable?”

“I’ll tell him that you hit Lukashka.”

“Go on, tell him,” Pavel dared. “Go on, tell him, and tomorrow your mother’s going to come to us for flour.”

I turned away from Pavel, not saying anything, Lukashka was silent too. The dogs had stopped fighting; tired and bleeding they lay against each other, licking their wounds. Lukashka jerked the reins of his horse. Pavel swerved to the boundary ridge. The dogs rose and followed their masters; I got off the cart and began walking home.

The rest of the day my ears were ringing with Pavel’s words: “Go on, tell him, and tomorow your mother’s going to come to us for flour!”

2

I didn’t tell Mother anything. At night I dreamt of nothing but dogs. Toward morning I began dreaming that it wasn’t dogs that were fighting but

Pavel was hitting Lukashka on the face. Lukashka stares at me with his good eye. “Go, go,” he begs. His face’s all bloody, his nose is broken, but I’m numb from fear. I can’t budge. I see Lukashka creeping up to me, grabbing my hand and my shoulder and whispering, “Go, hurry to the constable.”

I lose my breath from fear. I begin to roll over and over, and then … I woke up. Mother stood beside me, shaking my shoulder. “Go on, hurry to the constable,” I heard her whisper. “The foreman’s here waiting for you.”

In a flash all my sleep was gone. I rubbed my eyes: there was the foreman talking to my father. “You little stinking highness,” he turned to me. “You think the constable’s going to wait for you till you’re good’n ready? Hurry up or he’ll throw you in the klink.”

Mother called me out into the porch. She looked around to make sure that the door was tightly shut behind and told me in an angry, clipped whisper. “Don’t you get it into your head to finger Mr. Pavel. You’ve seen nothing, hear? What’s that one-eyed Lukashka to you anyway? Today he’s a sore mug, tomorrow he’ll forget all about it. But if the Karpukhins refuse us flour, we croak from hunger. Hear?”

I remembered yesterday’s incident very clearly. I was so scared that a chill hit me on the spine. “Mom,” I said, “I’m going to tell only the truth.”

“Which truth?” she asked, drawing her face close to mine.

“That Mister Pavel hit Lukashka.”

Mother’s fist came near my nose. “You daresn’t. I’ll give you the licking of your life, hear? Pavel’s never laid a hand on Lukashka. Never, you hear? And don’t you dare lie to the constable; you sing the truth or else.”

“I’ll tell the truth,” I promised.

“Which one?” Mother asked again.

I had no time to answer. Out came the foreman and led me off to the “Hall,” the villagers’ meeting place. When we walked out into the street, kids began to follow us. Mother, too, followed all the time looking around herself like a thief.

My playmate, Syomka, Pavel’s little boy, crossed our way. Not paying any attention to the foreman, he came close to me and dared with goggling eyes. “You goin’ to squeal on my pappy?”

“I will,” I said, clenching a fist—just in case.

Syomka swung out, as if he was going to hit me. But seeing that he'd get one back right away, he asked instead. "You want me to rap you on the mouth?"

"Go ahead," I challenged. "But you'll get it back—with interest."

We were about to grab each other. "Look at these pups," the foreman laughed, pulling us apart. "You'll have time for fighting later. We've got other things to attend to now."

The "Hall" was full. The foreman nudged me ahead through the crowd, toward the constable sitting behind a desk. "Here's your chief witness," he said, seeming to be talking to the constable and the folks at the same time.

The constable adjusted the sabre hanging at his side and set back the blue-ribboned cap to the back of his head. Then he wrinkled his brow and looked at me sternly. Pavel, sitting next to him, smiled at me gaily and stroked his moustache. "Your Excellency, ask Vaska here, and he'll tell you that it wasn't me that hit One-Eye there," Pavel said, nodding toward Lukashka sitting glumly a little farther away in the corner. "Dogs we sicked, true—but hit him? I never laid a hand on the lad. I'd never smear up a boy's mug like that, no sir!"

Lukashka stared at the ceiling. His face was swollen; there were black welts round his eyes. The constable screwed up his eyes and although I stood almost next to the desk, he said to me. "You boy, will you come a little closer."

I made a step closer; my knees buckled under me.

"Were you in the fields with Lukyan at lunchtime yesterday?" the constable asked.

"I was," I said.

"Who else was there?"

"Mister Pavel here …"

"And what were you doing there?"

"Sicking dogs," I said.

"Then what?"

"Then?" I repeated and looked back for some reason. I saw my mother; she began to blink her eyes and shake her head so hard that I forgot what I'd wanted to say.

"Well, come on, talk," the constable insisted.

“Then …” I began, stepping from foot to foot. “Then … Then …” No words came out. When I had pointed at Mr. Pavel, I saw him draw his brows together so hard and toss his head so fiercely that I’d forgot the tongue in my mouth. The folks behind began to make loud noises. “Talk, talk,” they asked me.

“Quiet,” the constable roared. “Then what?” he turned to me again. “Tell the truth, did Pavel Karpukhin hit Lukyan or was it Lukyan himself that fell and hit his head against the plough. You tell the truth, boy!”

“Constable, Sir,” Lukashka shouted angrily, jumping up from the bench, “this is not the way to make an inquest.”

“Don’t you try to teach me,” the constable reddened on the face. “You know what you may get for this?”

“I’m not trying to teach you, Sir,” Lukashka answered. “I’m only trying to say you shouldn’t scare the boy. Vasya,” Lukashka turned to me, “tell the truth, Vasya. How it was, what you saw—don’t be afraid, nothing’ll happen to you if you tell the truth.”

“Sure,” Pavel boomed. “Nothing’ll happen …”

“Nothing’ll happen if you tell the truth,” I heard people buzzing behind me. “He, our little Vaska’ll never tell a lie,” I heard my mother’s voice trembling with tears. “He alway’ tells the truth.”

“Come on, talk,” the constable kept insisting while at the same time scribbling something on a piece of paper.

They were asking me to tell them the truth and I didn’t know which truth to tell them—the real truth, that Pavel had given Lukashka a beating? Whenever I opened my mouth to say it, my eyes met with Mr. Pavel’s frowning face and I heard those words ringing in my ears: Go on, tell, and your mother’ll come tomorrow for flour. Should I tell them that Lukashka fell and hit himself on the plough? Lukashka’s reproachful eyes, his beat-up face met my eyes and made me feel ashamed of myself. Which kind of truth was the truer, I asked myself?

I looked at the villagers gathered in the room, at the kids, and at Syomka, who had asked if I was going to squeal on his pappy. Syomka showed me a fist on the sly. I looked back at the constable and I remembered that he was going to move in to be rooming at the Karpukhins; then I heard Lukashka’s pleading voice: Come on, talk, nothing will happen to you if you tell the truth.

“Come on, talk,” I heard Mr. Pavel chime in. “They haven’t hung anyone for tellin’ the truth.”

It was hard for me, a twelve-year-old boy, to decide which kind of truth to tell: The Lukashka kind with its beat-up face, or the Pavel kind that looked like two measures of flour? I remembered how we had been waiting yesterday for our father to come back from the Glazovs; how Mom scolded and how she went to the Karpukhins … I remembered it and not knowing myself I let the words come out, “Mr. Pavel hadn’t hit Lukashka; he fell and cut himself on the plough …”

I said it and broke out in tears. I cried because I thought it wasn’t, me that had spoken but some other boy. I heard a sigh of relief, probably my mother’s, and I heard Pavel’s gay voice, “I’ve been tellin’ you the kid’ll tell the truth.” Then, as if in a dream, I heard my mother’s voice, “My boy’s alway’ been so so much for the truth alway’ …”

From all these words, Mr. Pavel’s, my mom’s, the floor seemed to sway under me. I thought I was falling, and my face began to burn, and my heart was ready to jump out, and my knees began to buckle. I saw the constable writing down something; then I heard him say, “So in other words, it wasn’t he who hit him.”

What else I might have said I don’t know, were it not that I heard Lukashka—One-Eye, as they call him. There was the poor orphan who I loved for the books that he had given me and for so many other things … “Ey, you, you Vasya …” I heard his reproachful sigh …

These words made me ache. I quickly turned around, caught a glimpse of my mother’s happy smile, of Pavel’s happy face, of those wondering villagers and suddenly, surprising everybody in the room, I began to shout out in anger. “No, no, Mr. Pavel *did* hit Lukashka. He hit him and hit him. He gave’m a bloody nose and all that. He pushed him down and hit him again. It was him, Mr. Pavel. An’ I don’t want your flour, you can keep it. I don’t want it, I don’t …”

Somebody else had begun to shout but I saw nothing until somebody grabbed my hand and pulled me. I felt a burning on my cheek—my mother was slapping me. She had dragged me out onto the street, her face was twisted from hateful fear and anger, she kept slapping me on the face and screaming, “Will you tell the truth, will you, will you …”

I rocked from side to side, repeating like a dummy, “I will, I will, I will …”

Mother kept hitting and hitting me. But the more she slapped, the more stubborn and contrary I’d become. And then I caught her finger with my teeth and bit. Mother ouched and let go of me. I broke away and began to run. I ran through yards, through fields and dove into the hemp.

3

I walked and walked for a long time. I walked through fields, along boundary ridges, in the blooming rye and in the greying oats. I didn’t know where I was going, I just wanted to get away. Whenever I saw lorries I’d hide in the crops; I was still afraid they were coming to ask me for the truth, the kind of truth that brings flour.

Then I got out into the open steppe. It was vast and blue, and covered with stacks of landlords’ hay. I began to feel sleepy. To crawl into one of those stacks, I thought, and fall asleep, and sleep, and sleep …

I remembered Mishka. Why didn’t I go with him? I asked myself. I could hear the low mooing of cows, the baaing of sheep and the ringing neighs of frisky colts. I remembered the herd I was supposed to tend today. It was noontime and the herd was at its water stand at the pond—an old pond with muddy stinking water where we’d stick in the muck up to our knees, and yet whenever we kids took the herd out we’d always go swimming in it.

I went to find them. Old Yefim was there, bent over the wickerwork he was doing and his two helpers were asleep under a willow. Old Yefim didn’t ask me anything and I told him nothing. I watched him for a long while until he took the pipe out of his mouth and asked, “You came?”

“I came,” I said.

“You want to run up and fetch me some wicker?” he asked. I knew exactly what kind of wickers he needed. I cut them up from the osier bushes and took them over to him.

“Well done,” old Yefim praised me. “You want a bite?”

It occurred to me that I hadn’t eaten anything since last night. “Uhhuh,” I said.

“Take some bread. Like as not potatoes are ready in the ashes.”

The potatoes were nice and crispy. The helpers awoke and we drove the herd back onto the pasture. The whole afternoon we looked after the cattle, running after stray cows, shouting and whistling. I completely forgot that Mom was probably looking for me, scolding, not knowing where to find me.

In the evening we brought the herd home into the village. From afar I could see our cottage; Dad walking home stooped from the threshing floor, and Mom waving her arms, going somewhere, then turning to Aunt Maura.

I sneaked into my favorite hut, scrambled onto an old pile or chaff and took out the last piece of bread from my pocket. I had deliberately saved it. A while later, when it became quite dark I heard fast steps outside. My heart jumped at the familiar voice, “Where could that devil’s brood be? Just let me get my hands on him!”

She was still looking for me! I was afraid Mom might take a peek inside where she had surprised me already with a book in my hands. I got out through a hole on the side, crawled on the ground, until I reached the threshing floor. Then I began to run. I ran along field boundaries, then turned onto the street. The dark night made my fears grow and grow. I walked and walked, not knowing where to stop. Lukashka! Why not go to him? I thought.

Lukashka always slept in his master’s barn. “This is my nest,” he’d tell me. I softly opened the door and took a peek. He was still awake. “Is it you, Vasya?” he asked.

“It’s me,” I said. “What’re you doing?”

“Thinking. Can’t sleep.”

“What about?”

“Everything,” Lukashka said, making room beside himself on the bedding. “Come up here, Vasya. Where’ve you been?”

“Everywhere,” I lay beside him and we were silent for a while. “You mean you weren’t home?” he asked me.

“I musn’t go home.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Mom’ll beat me up.”

“Why should she beat you up?” Lukashka wondered.

“I don’t know why but she will.”

“But I know,” Lukashka smiled.

“You know?” I asked in surprise. “How would you know?”

“How? Easy,” he said.

“Then tell me.”

“It’s because of the truth,” he said.

“The truth! Eh, you’re like all the others,” I waved my hand. “Everybody says you’ve got to tell the truth and nothing’ll come to you. Truth doesn’t burn, doesn’t sting, but …”

“But it depends which kind of truth,” Lukashka laughed. “There’re two, you know. One’s poor, carries a bag; the other’s rich, has a trunk. If you tell the first one, you get it with a stick over your paws; if you tell the other one, you get bread into them.”

I thought of the flour and the beating mother gave me. “You’re so right,” I said sadly. “Now there’ll be no flour for us; the bin in the pantry shed’ll stay empty and we’ll croak from hunger.”

“Uh, don’t worry,” Lukashka mutered. He might have been talking to me or to himself.

He woke me up early next morning. “Go on home now, Vasya,” he told me. “I’ve got to go out tilling.”

I rubbed my eyes and scrambled down from his “nest.” I went toward home but then stopped behind the corner of our cottage to watch; mother was driving the sheep out to pasture—her face was smeared, tearful. I thought she was probably awake most of the night, crying, maybe worrying about me, maybe about the flour.

Pavel’s wife had driven the cows out of the Karpukhin yard. Seeing Mother, she stopped and rocked her heavy, pregnant belly. “Ari-ii-nushka,” she chanted loud’n clear for the whole street to hear. “You awlready t’come for the flour? Your bag wide’n roo-oo-my? Ey you miserable beggar woman, you moo-oo-cher. Ever thought of raisin’ your own bread, you good-f’-nothin’ baa-aggars?”

My mother, the champion name-caller and quarreler, didn’t answer a word. She smirked sheepishly and hurried back home. But then, I don’t know whether I gave myself away by leaning out too far, or Mom just happened to take a glimpse in my direction, there she stopped and stared at me. I remained like chained to the ground as she slowly moved toward me, swinging that stick she used to drive out the sheep.

“Wa-al,” she finally shouted. “Get in already, get in. Where’ve you been? What do you care that your mother’s worryin’ to death about you? Wa-al, get in, get in. Hey, you old poop,” she shouted at Dad, “come here and help me catch this brat so I can lay my hands on him.”

Happen what may, I decided, I’m going to walk up to her myself. “Go on, hit me Mom,” I dared. “Kill me, I don’t care, I’m a goner anyway.”

My words might have stunned her. It might have been she was glad inside that I’d come back. She raised her stick as if to hit me, but instead, took a hold of my hair and waved a bandaged finger in front of my nose. “Look what you’ve done, look wha …” Mom groaned heavily and began to cry before she finished the sentence.

I pushed my head into her apron. “Mommie, Mommie,” I pleaded. “For Christ’s sake I’d rather have you beat me up than hear you cry. Mommie, I’m sorry I wore you out; please beat me up an’ you’ll feel better. You will …”

She stopped crying and threw away the stick. Her hand moved affectionately over my head, then gave me a light tap on the shoulder. “Go inside,” she said softly. “You must be hungry.”

I went inside with her following. She set a pot full of potatoes in front of me on the table. “Because of you, you little imp, they gave us no flour,” she growled, without looking at me. “An’ two full lorries they ground up yesterday …” While my little sister and me ate potatoes, Mom went out to the pantry shed to bring me a slice of bread from the last loaf we had been eating a whole week already. She came back a few minutes later, a mixture of fright and joy on her face. She winked at Dad who was gulping the potato water. “Father,” she whispered at him, “come out with me, quick.”

“Why?” he asked guiltily.

“Where did you scrounge up the flour?” she asked.

“What flour?” Dad looked at her, then at us in amazement.

“Come take a look at the pantry,” she pointed her head.

He got up, wiping his hands on his pants. We went out—Mom leading, me right behind her, and the rest of us following. She led us to the bin in the pantry. “There,” she pointed.

Dad rubbed his eyes and bent over. “My Lord,” he exclaimed, taking a handful of flour, “what’s this? Where did you hustle it up, Mother?”

“That’s what I’m askin’ you,” she replied. “Where did you get it?”

“Don’t know anything, Mother. Don’t know a thing, so help me.” Dad kept shaking his head.

He and Mother and all of us stood there over the bin, basking our eyes in about three measures of beautiful flour. Where did it come from? we asked ourselves. I was getting dizzy from trying to think. Where did it come from? I asked myself time and time again. Then a thought struck me. This thought made me tremble, and in my trembling I hadn’t realized that I said aloud, “You won’t croak from hunger!”

“What did you say?” Mother asked.

“You won’t croak,” I repeated in a clear voice, then looking around as if to tell a secret, I began to explain in a whisper: “That’s Lukashka’s flour … Last night …”

Dad sighed and mumbled. Mom bent over the bin and cried. Her tears fell into the flour and made a few tiny clumps …

1916

Me'n My Big Mouth

by Semyon Podyachev

Semyon Pavlovitch Podyachev, 1866-1934. Born to a peasant family, studied in technical school, later performed all kinds of jobs before starting to write. He wrote mostly short stories about village life. On Gorki's suggestion, Podyachev wrote an autobiographical novel My Life *which appeared in serial form from 1929 through 1934.*

The wind howled and every now and then I could hear the roof crackling from the frost. We felt cozy inside, my wife and I, she was busy with her sewing, me—reading a book. The silence and the monotonous tick-tock of the old clock pendulum hanging on the wall made me forget time. When I looked up and saw it was nine (because my wife had suddenly stopped sewing and begun listening), I wondered who might be calling at this late hour—late by our village habits.

"A lorry pulled up," she had said.

"Come on," I had told her. "It's probably the wind."

"Somebody pulled up," she insisted. "Can't you hear? They're unhitching the horse. Go out, have a look. Go on, you can drop your book for a minute. Sits there his nose in his book, the whole evening not a word out of him. Go out, have a look."

"What for?" I asked. "The door's not locked. If somebody's out there, he'll find his way in."

"How lazy can you get? Perhaps it's a stranger? Are you afraid you'll freeze if you go out a minute? You better watch out," she sneered, "there may be a dog, it'll bite you."

“I don’t think it’s a dog,” I said. “A dog would’ve been barking its head off by now.” It was just that I didn’t feel like going out into the cold. “If somebody wants, he’ll find the door,” I repeated.

“Oh, go to hell,” my wife became angry. She threw her sewing aside, got up and walked out silently onto the porch to have a look through the window. I put my book aside too, turned up the lamp and began to wait and listen.

“Who’s there?” I heard my wife’s voice a moment later. In response there was something that sounded like a hoarse, low mooing.

“Ah, it’s you,” I heard her voice again. “Come in, come on in. What’s the matter, you afraid of the dog? Don’t, he ran away, the neighbors probably took’im in. You cold?” ’

The same mooing in reply but this time closer. I could make out the words by now: “A little … Frost’s not too big but better not stay out too long. Sam home?”

“He’s home, he’s home,” my wife said. “Come on in … Tied up the horse?”

“Sure thing. Where’ve you got the entrance here? Can’t see a darn thing … afraid to bump my head in this unholy dusk. My eyes, they ain’t what they used to be. Where are you?”

“I’s here. There …”

The voice stopped. I heard the slamming of the closed porch door and a few seconds later I saw my wife stepping in over the threshold and right behind her I saw something big, wrapped in coats, taking up the whole doorway. It was panting heavily.

The visitor first stopped at the threshold, took off his fur hat, and crossed himself toward the icon in the corner. Then, twisting his mouth from side to side, he began to pull icicles off his moustache and when he was through, he rasped: “Hello there, cousin. I’m on business … What a hard time findin’ your place.”

The *muzhik* looked familiar yet I couldn’t recognize him right away. “What swept you in here, Uncle Pyotr?” I asked when I finally knew who he was. “Haven’t seen you in how many years? Take off your coat.”

“I ’bin to see you the other day,” Uncle Pyotr said. “You ’bin away or somethin’. Didn’t your woman tell ye?”

“No.”

“I all forgot about it,” my wife said. “Goin’ out of my mind; how can you remember everythin’ with so many things to do around here?”

“ ‘Course,” the *muzhik* agreed. I thought there was some irony in his voice. I watched him pull off his worn-out cloth coat with its molten fur collar, and saw that the sheepskin underneath was also old and shoddy. “ ‘Course,” he repeated, taking this off too and tossing it on the stove. “Why should’ye think of us? Any fun? Too many of my kind … Well, you live all right, I see,” he said, limbering up. “To tell ye the truth, I’m a little chilly; nasty weather an’ agains’ the wind … Quite nasty. Besides, I’m no young colt any more, an’ as they say, an old trot is new to an old horse.”

He had been talking in a sort of hoarse, sickly drawl, giving me from time to time a water-eyed scowl from under his reddish, overhanging brows. His thin, livid lips had been twitching nervously, twisting in-between words into a kind of neither vicious nor pitiable pretense of a timid sneer.

“Come on in,” I said, as I saw him stepping from foot to foot, slapping against the floor with his frozen, patched felt boots. “Why do you stand at the door? Come on in and sit at the fireplace … If your feet’re cold, go ahead, take off your boots. You may lie down on the stove while they’re drying …”

“Never mind,” he said. “It’s all right. They’ll thaw by th’selves. What am I, a squire or somethin’?”

“What do you think, only squires get chilly and simple folks don’t?” I asked.

He laughed. “It seems so,” he rubbed his hands. “It seems so, Pavlitch,” he repeated, sitting at the table where the light of the lamp slanting from under the tilted shade shone on his face. “We’re always gettin’ it from everywhere. The wind’s ablowin’ from all four sides, it seems.”

“Have patience,” I said. “Give it some time and things may change. Maybe it’ll blow only at your back … Nyusha,” I asked my wife, “why don’t you put on the samovar?”

“If it’s just for me don’t bother,” Uncle Pyotr grunted.

“It’s no bother, no bother,” my wife assured him. “This thing here makes boiling water in no time. Sit a while, rest …”

“Oh, well,” he agreed. “But I didn’t come here for that.”

“Why did you come?” I asked.

“How shall I say it? I don’t feel right ’bout puttin’ye into all that trouble—samovar, night time an’ all that …” It was apparent, however, that the *muzhik* didn’t mean what he’d said. He liked the invitation—to sit a while in the cozy room and sip tea. He seemed to have cheered up; his neither vicious nor pitiable pretense of a timid sneer transformed into a smile, an invitingly trustful, simple smile. “I came to you, cousin, for advice,” he began, rubbing his chilled hands. “There’s a little business I have … I’d like you to write an appeal for me. Please do me a favor, I’ll return it somehow. All I’ve got now is a ten-kopeck bit, but I can repay you with potatoes or somethin’. You won’t lose out on me.”

“What’s it all about? What did they do to you?” I asked.

“You see,” he began in a plaintive voice. “They took me off relief. They gave me all the time but now they refuse. I don’t know what to do.”

“What kind of relief?”

“For my son … my son’d been took to war. It’s the second month already that there’s no news from him. I don’t know if he’s alive or dead. It was on account’o him I was on relief, but now … they cut it off.”

“Who cut it off?” I asked.

“How do I know? County authorities … all of them nothin’ but one unholy gang.”

“But why?” I wondered. “It’s strange.”

“They say I oughtn’t t’ be gettin’ any. They say I’m healthy an’ can work, they say. Healthy, they should see so well! Here, here I’ve got a cettificat from the doctor. It says right here that I’m ill and cannot do any work.”

“Show it to me.”

He plunged into his pocket and fished out a clumsy purse. His thick fingers trembled nervously as he fumbled in its contents. “Here it is,” he finally got out a folded piece of paper and reached it to me. “The lady dokhtor herself made it out for me.”

I unfolded the paper. Indeed, it was a doctor’s certificate that this so and so peasant had been sick, had recently been to a hospital; the name of the sickness was given and it was pointed out that it was a chronic disease.

“So why didn’t you show it to the board?” I asked.

“I showed it,” Uncle Pyotr assured me. “ ‘This,’ they said, ‘don’t mean a thing. You can work.’ To hell I can work … Can’t breathe, cough ’bin

chokin' me for months, burns right here …" he pointed at his side.

"I don't get it," I asked. "You say, they gave you and then suddenly stopped?"

"They gave me … once. Didn't say a word and now nothin'. My son, I raised him, 'n raised him. 'I'm growin' a heck of a helper,' I usta tell myself. Married him off too, now his wife, she's with me, young an' a baby too, an' another on the way … My old woman, she's even worse than me … none of us work. What can I do?"

"How about her, your daughter-in-law? Doesn't she get anything?"

"She does, why shouldn't she get?" the *muzhik's* voice rang with indignation. "So what if she gets? What's hers is hers. But why shouldn't old parents get too? They owe it to us, let 'em give! It's not theirs to give anyway. What do you think, my son came easy to me?"

"I don't know, Uncle Pyotr, so help me. I just don't know what to say," I sighed.

"You've got to write the appeal for me, Pavlitch," he begged.

"Where to?"

"To the District, some people teached me. 'Write to the committee,' they said. And this dokhtor paper ought to go there too. Do me a favor, cousin, write it up for me. There's a fellow in town who I asked to write it for me and he says, 'Gimme three quarters and I'll do it.' You ever heard of such people? All they want is skin you. I 'bout started to give that sonovubitch a good tongue lashin' when …" The *muzhik* paused, sniffled for a while, then resumed, "I s'pose it's because of my big mouth that they got mad at me. It's my big mouth, that's why."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That's because of the truth. 'cause I blabber the truth to their faces. Why should I be afraid of it?" Uncle Pyotr glared at me. "A few weeks 'go, the County scribe jumped at me and began screamin'. 'Don't you raise your voice at me,' I tol'm, 'an' stop elbowin'. Who d'you think you are? You work for me. Who pays your salary? Me, us! You ought to serve me not me you,' I point my finger at him. He didn't like it a bit. Then the chief clerk came out. 'Why are you yelling, big mouth?' he asks. 'You think you have it comin' more than anybody else?' So I gave him a piece of my mind. An' now they all hate me."

Uncle Pyotr was getting more and more excitable. “Not so long ago,” he went on, “they had a meetin’ in the County House about this relief thing. I made sure that I was ‘round. I came, they’re all there, shut the’selves in the other room, don’t let anybody in. ‘May I get in?’ I ask the assistant scribe. ‘No,’ he says. ‘An’ why not?’ I ask. ‘Because the doors’re shut, that’s why,’ he tells me. ‘An’ why’s the door shut?’ I ask ’gain. ‘Because they don’t want any busybody fools like you to bother them,’ he shouts an’ tries to chase me away. So I shoved’im aside, this thievin’ raw pup, an’ made my way inside where all the board’s sittin’ around a table. ‘What are you doing here?’ they all yell at me, ‘No outsiders allowed.’ I’m already mad. ‘An’ why not allowed?’ I ask, ‘Would’ye mind explainin’? Why all these secret meetin’s? Why can you be here and not me? Unless you’ve done somethin’ screwy, why shouldn’t I hear?’ I really gave it to them.”

“So what happened?” I was becoming interested.

“You know what happened.” Uncle Pyotr snickered bitterly. “They couldn’t stand my guts an’ made me leave … Then I went to the count an’ told’im everything, tried to explain, showed’im the paper … But he says, ‘I don’t know anything. We have a county board for that.’ I pleaded with the count, ‘What board!’ I cried. ‘They don’t let me open my mouth. They give to who don’t need and me they cut off.’ The count gets disgusted with me. ‘I don’t know anything,’ he shouts. ‘I’m sick and tired of you fellows!’ So what do you do? One says, ‘I don’t know,’ says the other, ‘this isn’t my case,’ and the third one don’t even want to listen. Who does know? The Tsar hisself told’em to give, why don’t they? My son’s no foreigner, he may be dead by now—who’s to feed me if not them? No,” the *muzhik* had a hard glare in his watering eyes, “I won’t let ’em get away with it, I won’t.”

I was feeling very sorry for Uncle Pyotr, yet I didn’t know how I could help him, whether writing the appeal would really help. I glanced at him but didn’t say anything.

“I even went to see our priest, Father Vassily,” Uncle Pyotr went on. “He, too, got at my throat, began rememberin’ things, an’ somebody must’ve squealed on me that I didn’t osserf fastin’ times … ‘Why aren’t you to confessions?’ Father Vassily asks me, ‘and why are you guzzling milk on Wednesdays and Fridays?’ Who am I to listen, him or the dokhtor? The dokhtor tole me to keep drinkin’ milk … ‘You so-’n-so,’ the priest tells me, ‘why don’t you come to church?’ I tell’im I’ve got no suit of clothes to wear to church, and he says, ‘What do you need a suit of clothes for? You a

young bride or something, or a girl looking for a suitor? You come to church to pray to God and not show off your clothes.' Father Vassily's gettin' annoyed with me but I feel I've got to tell'im the truth. 'To pray I can do much better at home by myself,' I say. 'With nobody t' bother me or tempt me.' He's mad. 'Don't you get smart-alecky, you heretic,' he shouts. 'I'll probably grab'ye by the tail and knock your brains out. What d'yea think you are, you devil, another Tolstoy or Gorki?' An' he went on an' on, an' I lissen till I can't anymore. 'What's the use of comin' t'ye,' I say. 'You never tell anythin' new, alway' the same Lord've mercy, Lord've mercy.' That deak lissens, chewin' his cud an' starin' at me. He's beginnin' to look as if he wants to eat me up. An' then he bares his teeth 'n reaches out for my neck, an' before I know he's grabbed me by the collar. So tight that I'm beginnin' to think my end has come. He turns me around an' sticks my snout into the door an' makes me push it wide open. I twitch in his iron clutch like a chicken under a knife an' itch with my heels to give'im a kick somewhere, but I can't do it. In the meantime he's dragged me out through the porch an' onto the wing an' there he stops for a sekind on top of all those steps, to take a breather like, then socks me with his knee in the spot I'm sittin' … I come tumblin' down all those steps an' he yells, 'There's your relief, bigmouth, and if it isn't enough come back for more. I'll teach you how to wag your tongue."

The *muzhik* paused. "Nifty, huh?" he asked with a bitter smile.

"Not bad," I agreed.

We were both silent. He was staring at his feet, I watched the samovar. Several times I caught his questioning glimpses before he asked, "You know little Igor Kila, the cashier at County Credit 'ssociation?"

I nodded.

"Well, I had some business with that viper. I come to his office to ask for a loan … to pay pasturin' fees, buy some boots, some rags … I went late in the afternoon, the tavern next door's still open, folks comin' in and out. I had a mind to stop in and lose myself a ten-kopeck bit but then thought better of it. They might smell the booze on me an' not like it. Might stop in later, I thought. So I walked straight to the office an' gave the chief clerk my pass book. I wait 'n wait an' see the members of the board are all there, Igor Kila has come too. They all go into the other room to talk things over. Then they begin to call out names. One goes in and comes out with money; then next an' next … 'Pyotr Baboshkin,' somebody shouts, 'Here he is,' I

call back, ‘I is Baboshkin.’ They ask me in an’ I greet’em, an’ then the chairman sittin’ at the head of the table gives me back the empty passbook, ‘Your request was declined, Mr. Baboshkin.’ he says. ‘Why?’ I ask. ‘Everybody got the money, why not me?’ Little Igor Kila gets hot under the collar. ‘Let me remind you,’ he shouts, ‘when you took you never made payments on time.’ I, too, am beginnin’ to get hot. ‘So what,’ I shout back, ‘I paid interess, didn’t I?’ He shouts, ‘We don’t care for your interest; we want our borrowers to make payments when they’re due.’ So I stop shoutin’ and plead with him. ‘But what could I do if I had no money at times?’ Little Igor gets fresh with me, ‘You took, you should’ve known the time to pay back. I know your kind. From here you go right to the tavern.’ This, I tell you, Pavlitch, made me see red. I gave that little Igor an’ all the rest of ’em the tongue lashing of their lives. Let’em remember Pyotr Baboshkin!”

“What good did it do?” I asked. “It didn’t make them lend you the money, did it?”

“What do you mean it didn’t?” the *muzhik* shouted out proudly. “They gave me all right. ‘Here,’ they said, ‘take the money, and for Christ’s sake get lost.’ Oh, they hated my guts an’ my big mouth, but they gave … And now they cut me off relief … But I won’t let’em get away with it, oh, no. What gall that chief clerk has tellin’ me, ‘You so-’n-so, you think you have it comin’ more than anybody else?’ Who is anybody else? Them? Stuffin’ the’selves with our money … it makes me mad. Pavlitch, please do me the favor an’ write up that appeal for me, please …”

“What good will come of it?” I asked. “The writing is the least hard, but what’s the use?”

“What do you mean, ‘What’s the use?’ I’ve got a cettificat, don’t I? So help me, Sam, I’m not tryin’ to pull the wool over your eyes, believe me. I’m a sick man, can’t bend down, have trouble breathin’ … I hurt all over …” Uncle Pyotr groaned.

There was a moment of silence. I looked at my wife who watched the samovar, and thought that Uncle Pyotr might want his cup of tea. I wanted to ask him when the *muzhik* resumed in a crackling voice:

“… and yet I’m forced to work … It’s beyond me but I’ve got to do it; I cart wood from the grove to the station—nine quarters a fathom they pay. After you turn around you’ve got left enough for a smoke, oats’ expensive, six quarters a measure, hay about four, and a man has got to live, too … An’ how full can you stack your cart? Not even half, one-fourth maybe, three-

eighth the most. You start a li'l after midnight an' by the time you're finished it's dawn … An' twenty verst back to town, all hilly road, the nag's just so-so. You come back by noon an' by the time you're unloaded, had some tea, it's nighttime. You go home, unhitch, have some chow an' lie down. Before you know it the rooster's at ye 'gain; time to get up. What kind of life is it, Pavlitch? Will there ever be an end to it?"

"I don't know, friend," I said.

"After the war, you think, maybe?"

"Maybe," I said. "Anyway, what kind of better times do you expect?"

"In gen'ral, maybe … I can't really say. Now look at me, what do I look like? An animal almost. Look what I wear, the same things over'n over for years. An' for years nothin' but potaters'n potaters. You want to know what I know? Nothin' … maybe how to pull a cart no poorer than m'nag. I can't read, can't count … A li'l note, an' I've to run to folks to read it for me, all my life have 'bin waitin' for somethin'. What?" Uncle Pyotr broke off and began blinking his eyes. For a while as he stared at the fireplace, I began to feel uncomfortable. My wife poured him a bowl of tea, and offered some cookies.

"Here, have a bite," she invited him. "Stop feelin' sorry for yerself. We don't live much better."

"My heart's breakin' for my only son," he sniffled, accepting the tea and the cookies from her.

"Are you the only one?"

"Raised'im an' raised'im; married'im an' thought he'd take care of me at old age …" Uncle Pyotr choked on his sorrow. He took a gulp, put the tea aside and … began to cry.

My heart ached for him. I watched the tears running down his weatherbeaten, sallow cheeks and wished I could help. "Come on, get a hold of yerself," my wife asked. "You're a grown *muzhik,* not a boy."

"It ain't easy, dear," Uncle Pyotr sniffled. "You should come to us an' see how we live. My old woman, never a dry eye, and the young one never stops sobbin' … day'n night. 'Where is he, my man?' she asks. My boy, he was with the Nineteenth Siberian Riflers, he was … Haven't heard from him in months, who knows is he live or dead? The priest says 'A martyr's wreath shines upon his head, he deserves the kingdom of heaven.' It's easy for him to talk. Don't the others, those Hermans an' Ossians get killed too, I

ask? ‘Where’ll they go, not to heaven? Aren’t all people the chil’ren of God?’ The priest says, ‘We’re the true Christians, we war for the truth, not them.’ I argue, ‘I’m tellin’ ye, your grace, they, too, think they war for the truth.’ The priest’s gettin’ mad. ‘You stupid pig,’ he shouts, ‘you’ve an evil tongue. I ought to sew it to your teeth so that you stop waggin’ it. You thresh your tongue but your head’s empty.’ I agreed. ‘You’re right,’ I said, ‘I suffer on account of my big mouth.’ “

“It’s obvious,” I agreed. “Look at me, don’t I suffer for what I’ve said or wrote?”

“You can talk, sittin’ here, sippin’ tea,” the *muzhik* snarled. “They hadn’t took anybody from you. But me, what am I going to do all by myself?”

“Maybe the Lord will put an end to this war,” my wife said. “I bet your li’l grandson’s cute.”

“He’s over two,” Uncle Pyotr smiled. “A happy li’l fella, rings like a li’l bell from mornin’ to night … never stops askin’ questions,” Uncle Pyotr paused. “It’s her own fault, my stupid daughter-’n-law,” he frowned. “She learned’im to speak ’bout his father too much. ‘He’ll come home soon,’ she’d tell him, ‘an’ bring you lots o’ presents.’ Now the li’l boy don’t give it any rest. ‘Mommie,’ he asks, ‘how soon’ll Daddy be home with ‘sents?’ She lissens then sobs ’n sobs. Big as a barrel she is, an’ yellow-like, always angry. My old woman ’n me, we look at her, hear her sob an’ we too can’t help cryin’ … Sometime late at night all three of us … can’t stop. An’ the wind howls outside, this don’t help, an’ we cry, an …”

Uncle Pyotr choked, and … cried out again.

It was too much for me to watch him. I went outside, into the cold evening and heaved a sigh. Myriads of stars glistened like distant, little embers on the ink-blue sky, and the ground was bathed by a milky-pale light falling from the crescent of the moon hanging on the east. It was so quiet! The distant sky, the stars, the forest, and the fields—everything was so quiet that I could almost palp it. It touched me, and when it did it made me very, very sad …

1926

Two Deaths

by Alexander Serafimovitch

Alexander Serafimovitch, 1863-1949, son of a Cossack Officer, joined the revolutionary movement and was arrested and exiled. He wrote expressive and vivid stories of the lower middle class. In his novel The Iron Torrent, *1924, he depicted the civil war in a series of pseudo-impressionistic flashes.*

It was a threatening November sky that hung low over the wet, cold roofs, and death from the White Cadet snipers lurking between the chimneys waited to snuff out some careless Red Guard on the square below.

The girl came into headquarters of the Moscow Soviet, grey-eyed, a kerchief tied around her head, and said, "How can I be of any help to the revolution? I'd like to keep you informed about the Cadets' moves. I'm not good at nursing, and besides you've probably got too many nurses anyway. I can't fight either, never held a weapon in my hands. But if you give me a pass, I'll get some information for you."

The comrade in the greasy leather jacket, with the Mauser behind his belt, fixed on her his sunken face consumed by sleepless nights and fever. "If you sell us out, we'll shoot you," he issued a stern warning. "You understand? And if they find out, they'll shoot you there. It may them or us."

"I know," the girl said calmly.

"Have you taken all that into account?"

"You just give me the pass good for all posts," she adjusted the kerchief on her head. "Also, make it that I'm an officer's daughter."

She was asked into another room and a sentry was placed at the door. Some time later a hail of shots rang outside: a White Cadet armored car had raided the square, done some damage, and disappeared.

"Who the hell knows," said the comrade with the sunken, consumptive face. "I had some documents made up for her; let'er have'm. Sure she may let us down, but what the hell can she tell about us? All right, but if we catch'er lying—that'll be the end of her."

The girl was handed the forged documents. She took off toward the Arbat Square and the Alexandrov Military School. The Red Army men let her by. On Znamenka she stashed away the Red pass and soon enough she was surrounded by Cadets who led her off to the school guardhouse.

"I'd like to work as a nurse," she told them. "My father was killed in the German war during General Samsonov's retreat and my two brothers are fighting the Reds in Cossack regiments on the Don. I live in Moscow now with my kid sister."

"That's splendid," she was told. "We're glad to have you. In our difficult struggle for a Great Russia we are thankful for the help of any well-meaning patriot. You say, you're an officer's daughter? Would you like some tea?"

They took her to the refectory and brought her some tea. "Stepanov," the officer in charge told one Cadet. "Dress up like a worker and get over to the Red side. Here's a girl's address in Pokrovka. Find out all you can about her."

Stepanov put on a coat that had been stripped off a shot workman. He also put on his pants, torn boots and hat, and when dusk set in he took off for Pokrovka.

"Yah, we have one with that name livin' in number two," he was told there. "With a kid sister. Dirty, capitalist brood!"

"Where's she now?" Stepanov wanted to know.

"She's gone since mornin'. Like's not they took'er away: what d'ya expect, a staff-captain's daughter she was? Why do you want her?"

"Just that I is from the same village a servant o'hers was. Wanted to say hello. Goodbye."

Late that evening the Cadets gave the grey-eyed girl their friendliest attention. There was pie and chocolate. Somebody played the piano; with a chivalrous genuflection, one Cadet handed her a bouquet of flowers. "We'll

scatter the feathers out of those uncouth savages," they laughed. "We gave them hell today, and tomorrow night we'll strike at the Smolensk Market and crush them."

In the morning they took the girl to the field hospital to teach her to make bandages. On the way, at the white wall she saw the body of a workman in a pink cotton print shirt lying in the mud. Over his left eye there was a darkened bullet hole.

"A spy," the Cadet explained curtly without looking at the dead man. "He was caught and shot."

The girl worked the whole day in the hospital. She was gentle and did her work skillfully; the wounded men had nothing but gratitude for this thick-browed nurse.

The next day toward evening she requested a pass home. "Are you mad?" they said. "There're Red patrols on every block. You'll leave our zone and those savages will seize you and shoot you on the spot."

"I'll show them my documents; I'm a peaceful girl," she reasoned. "I've got to go; my little kid sister is there all by herself. God knows what might happen to her."

"Yah, too bad you have a little kid sister. All right, I'll have two Cadets to see you safely though," the officer in charge said.

"No, no," she fantically waved her hands. "Let me go by myself, I can do it. I'm not afraid."

"Wa-a-all," the officer gave her a questioning look. "Are you sure you can make it by yourself?"

"I'm sure," she said. She stepped out into the dark night—no lights, no sounds, no clues. She thought of the dead workman in the pink cotton print shirt and shuddered.

From the school she groped her way through the Arbat Square. In the misty dark she could see only herself and apart from herself—nothing.

She wasn't afraid; only that everything inside was tight, tight …

Memories of her childhood came to her mind—how she used to clamber on her father's bed when he was gone to work, pull down the guitar hanging against a little carpet on the wall and sit down with it on the floor. She'd strum it while turning up the pegs, more and more, higher and higher, and listen to the pings getting sharper and sharper—to the point of becoming unbearable. Ping! The sound stabbed her heart in a thin, thin shudder. Was it

going to burst? Ants began running down her back, little beads sprang up on her forehead … What a spine-tingling, weird sensation! Delight in a form never before experienced!

The girl walked in the darkness, seeing herself but dimly, feeling no fear, just that the pitch of those pings grew and grew …

She reached out … there was the wall of a house. Horror suddenly came and spread in an enervating languor throughout her body, and the beads—as then in childhood—turned into perspiration. The wall of a house! She ought to have reached by now the Boulevard gridirons! Was she lost? Irrepressible strain broke out in a fine chattering of teeth. A voice seemed to be whispering into her ear: "Don't you see, this is the beginning of the end? You only think you've wandered off, but this is the begin …"

"No," she shouted to herself. "I'll find the way." With a superhuman effort she began to disentangle the web of confusion. Znamenka was to the right, so the Boulevard must be to the left. Apparently she was somewhere in between. She reached out—there was a post. A telegraph post? Her heart felt like a hammer as she dropped to her knees and groped on the ground. Her fingers touched the cool, humid iron—that was the Boulevard gridiron! At once the weight lifted. She rose calmly but then … a shiver overtook her. Everything around seemed to be reeling in the fog—becoming clear, then hazy; vanishing then reappearing. Everything seemed to quiver: the buildings, the walls, and the trees. Everything seemed to have the color of blood. The bloody-red trolley antennas moved; the bloody-red rails stirred. Even the fog, muddy-red, seemed to quiver. And the low-hanging clouds seemed to be ablaze—their redness the shade of blood.

The girl walked toward that silent blaze, toward the Nikitin Gate. How strange, she thought, why hasn't anybody halted me yet? Could they be lurking in those pitch-dark gates, behind those corners, not letting me out of their sight? Yet, she kept walking in clear view of everybody as if she were ablaze herself, in surroundings that were all ablaze.

She was calm. In one hand she squeezed the pass the Whites gave her, in the other the Reds'. Whoever will halt me will see the right pass, she told herself. There was nobody around, nobody but the silent, somberly-red blaze. What a weird spectacle at the Nikitin Gate! The raging flames were tearing furiously into the low-hanging crimson clouds, and the clouds and the crimson columns of smoke had become one billowing cauldron. A huge building was aglow with a dazzlingly incandescent light, and the insanely

quivering clouds were streaming toward it in a mad rush. The empty window sockets burned with a frenzy and it was only the black skeleton of the house, the black beams, rails, and walls, that seemed to stand unconcernedly still.

Sparks rose toward the clouds like the tail of a fire bird, crackling incessantly, filling everything around with an eerie crepitation.

The girl turned around. The city was immersed in darkness. The city with all its buildings, belfries and squares; the city with all its theatres and public houses—all of it had disappeared. In its place there was an incomprehensible mass of darkness.

In the darkness there was an incomprehensible silence; and in the silence there lurked a mysterious force, a nameless force ready to break out. But the silence hovered and hovered … It brought a nameless terror.

The heat was becoming unbearably intense. The girl started cutting across. A squat figure detached itself from the first dark corner. "Halt! Who are ya?"

She stopped. She could see no face, just the glimmer of the blaze on a naked bayonet. She forgot which pass was in which hand. The second of hesitation drew on. The barrel of the rifle rose to the level of her chest.

Why did she do it? She had wanted to reach out her right arm but in spite of herself she stretched her left. Her hand was trembling as she unclenched it—was that the right pass?

The man put his rifle aside and began smoothing the paper. His chilled fingers moved with awkward slowness. The girl shivered; it was a fine, sharp shiver she had never experienced before. A crackling sheaf of sparks shot up behind her, casting a tremulous light on the man's knobby palm. It was the Cadets' pass—lying upside down.

"Fie on you," she exclaimed boldly. "Can't you read?"

"Here, take it," he said in reply.

She crumpled the accursed paper.

"Where you goin'? he shouted at her back.

"To the Soviet," she said, turning around.

"Take the alleys; they may conk'ya off," he advised.

They were glad to see her at the Soviet. Her information was invaluable. The man in the leather jacket who had the consumptive face gave her a warm smile. "You're quite a gal," he said. "Just take good care of yerself."

The next day toward dusk, when the shooting had begun to die down, she took off again for the Arbat. The carts with wounded men didn't stop coming. The White Cadets had suffered heavy losses in their attack on the Smolensk Market and had to pull back.

The whole night the girl worked in the field hospital. She bandaged the wounded men, brought them water, and adjusted their bandages. Her face was drawn and tired, and she seemed not to notice the silent gratitude in the men's eyes. Toward dawn a hatless, disheveled Cadet in rumpled overalls came blustering into the hospital.

"There she is, that Judas bitch!" he shouted, his face twisted with hatred.

She reeled away; pale at first like death itself—then flushed from mortal fear. "You, you," she shouted back. "You kill the workin' man; it was his misery that made him fight. I didn't know how to fight like a man so I killed you the way I knew how …"

They took her out to the white wall where she meekly fell to the ground with two bullets in her heart. It was the same spot where the workman in the cotton print shirt had lain. She lay there for some time, staring at the threatening, grey sky with her thick-browed, wide-open grey eyes.

1936

The Safety Inspector

by Vassily Grossman

Vassily Semyonovitch Grossman, 1905-1965, born in Berdichev, Ukraine. His father was a chemical engineer and his mother a teacher of French. He studied engineering in Kiev and at Moscow. His first novel Glueckauf *about life in postwar Donbass appeared in 1934. During the Second World War Grossman served as war correspondent. His novel* The People Immortal, *published in 1942, was adapted for the stage in 1946, and later translated into English.* The Safety Inspector *received an enthusiastic review in* Literaturnaya Gazeta *in 1946.*

Whenever Polina Pavlovna was angry and began to talk loud and fast, Korolkov remembered his dentist's drilling machine. Korolkov had a theory about dealing with his wife, which he based on long engineering experience. As a safety inspector in the coal industry, he had devoted many years to studying detonations in subterranean projects. Having seen too many complications in trying to contain or eliminate accumulations of methane gas in otherwise well-ventilated shafts, Korolkov became a skeptic. So then, whenever his wife began to snarl and rile him during his peaceful after-dinner newspaper reading, he wouldn't even try to keep up the argument. I'm curious about what would happen, he'd think, if they put in here the interdepartmental commission with academician Skachinski as chairman—even they'd probably be unable to make any sense out of her.

Korolkov's friends would often advise him to find another job. "Any way you look at it," they'd tell him, "this is the most miserable job in the

coal industry." He knew it too; the inspector tries too hard, the production men are unhappy; he stops the drift and removes workers from cleaning jobs to scaffolding; the coal face is blocked off and the men in charge of production are mad. They may even rat on him. When the inspector stops trying, it's even worse—if somebody gets hurt it's his neck. No matter what, he is the first to be blamed, and anything can happen in a mine—a slide; a cave-in; a cable break; a little fire; a big explosion; people slip, fall, die …

"How many times were you prosecuted, Apollon Markovitch?" a friend once asked him.

"I stopped counting," he had said. "I don't keep personal statistics."

In spite of all his troubles, this thin, stooping engineer with a funny bow tie around his sinuous neck would stubbornly glower at the world and refuse to leave his post. As he couldn't imagine himself without this nerve-wracking job, Korolkov couldn't picture life without his formidable, long-faced wife who had once descended into a smoke-filled shaft to save him from burning to death. For the last twenty years she was bivouacking with him from mine to mine of the Donbass region after they had spent two years in an earthen shanty of the distant Karaganda, and had lived through the dizzying heat of the Kazachstan desert, the severe Tirgan frosts, and the ferocity of the Ural bedbugs in Chelyabinsk dormitories. Her character, true enough, wasn't the most congenial, but as far as Korolkov was concerned, she was a typical woman with her unexplainable and unexpected moods, the same as a mine, especially a gas mine.

The transfer of the Heavy Industry Commissariat had reached Apollon Markovitch Korolkov in the village Makeyevka, a mine of the Budyonny Management. "Apollon Markovitch," the manager said to him with a devilish chuckle, "I've for you a real box of candy from Moscow."

Korolkov. yawned. "I've seen such boxes of candy; have eaten more than a ton of them in my life."

"But this one is different," the manager said, rustling his papers. "This one may get stuck in your throat." Korolkov was surprised at the manager's ill humor. "What's the matter?" he asked angrily. "Is this because number four's closed? What have they come up with now? Is this a warning or a new summons to court, huh?" He reached out for the paper.

The manager had to swallow before answering. “To be frank with you, all you need is two pails of rectifier—nothing else. But … have a look. Here’s a transfer to Central Inspection … With an expression of personal gratitude and a three-thousand ruble bonus. Plus other benefits.”

Taking a look at Korolkov’s furrowed face above his protruding Adam’s apple, the manager gave another chuckle. This sourpuss sitting in front of him had no sense of humor.

Apollon Markovitch had thought at first that someone was pulling his leg; then he decided somebody in Moscow had made a mistake. When he finally convinced himself that the transfer was in order, he became rattled. As he rode down the elevator he kept shaking his head in disapproval.

Down in the mine he was finding fault with everything. He made a report against the drift manager, slapped a fine on a well-respected old foreman, and when he came home late in the evening he met his wife’s scowl with a scowl. “These Moscow wise guys have decided to give me a change of scenery with a three-thousand-ruble bonus,” he said. looking at her long face. “They’re transferring me to Moscow as Senior Inspector. God only knows what’s on their minds. ‘A box of candy,’ the manager calls it.”

If Korolkov had been wondering how his wife was going to take the news he got the surprise of his life. Polina Pavlovna hadn’t said a word. All during supper she was studiously watching her husband, as if she had suddenly discovered a terribly dangerous deformity on his face. Finally, he couldn’t stand it any longer. Aiming his fork at a pickled tomato, he asked, “Why’re you staring at me like a sphynx?”

Polina Pavlovna swallowed hard. “Apollon,” she gasped in a voice choked with tears, and then … for the first time in their married life she broke down crying. In his confusion, instead of trying to comfort her, Korolkov walked out to attend a mine surveyors’ general meeting. Later in the evening when he came home he asked, “Why did you cry, Polya?”

When she told him he burst out laughing. “What’s the matter with you?” he asked. “Are you crazy or something? Me running after Moscow dames? Just take one look at my muzzle—who’d want an old ape like me! Besides, why should I run out on you; you’re the only woman with whom I can prove myself as a man.”

“What would you want with me in Moscow?” Polina Pavlovna insisted. “I’m nothing but a homely old fool, and a nervous wreck to boot. You think

I still remember a word from what they taught us in gymnasium? Professors will be coming to see you there and what'll I tell 'em? You'll burn with shame for me."

Apollon Markovitch stared at his wife in amazement until doubts began to overcome him too. He walked up to the mirror to take a good look at himself. Filling his chest with air and blowing out his cheeks, he tried to make his face look handsome; he tried this way and that way and in the end he didn't like what he saw. "Oh, heck, who cares," he waved his hand and went to sleep. But sleep was slow in coming.

Thoughts of the past came instead; the first years of his married life. He had been working at the mine "Ivan" no more than twenty *verst* from here. Polina Pavlovna, sporting a blue flowing house dress and pony tails was as long-faced and homely then as she was now. His friend, the happy-go-lucky head miner Vanka Kuzhelev, a straightforward blabber-mouth, had warned him not to get married. "What do you want to do?" he had said. "Marry a horse? We've got forty mares in our subterranean stable, each as kind as a lamb. Why go'n look for a jibber?" Poor Kuzhelev was killed in a 1912 mine fire. How much coal had they mined since then? How many old people had passed away and new ones come? And all the innovations: electricity, pneumatic hammers, new work systems, and who knows how much more to come?

Yeah, a transfer to headquarters! Who had put in a good word for him? A blank wall. It had seemed as if there wasn't a man in the coal industry who hadn't had an axe to grind against him, and yet—somebody in Moscow must have liked him. Everything he had ever done was listed in the transfer order, like in 1930 when he had prevented a catastrophe in mine 17-17 B. Korolkov snickered. "They've nothing to do at headquarters but go digging in old files to find something like that! They may do what they want but they can't make me spend the rest of my days in Moscow." Polina Pavlovna would watch the apartment and he'd take a ride down to the Sub-Moscow coal basin to have a look at the bituminous coal they're mining there. That soil, somebody had told him, was bloated—so saturated was the coal with carbon dioxide—as in Mexican mines. One look at the Sub-Moscow coal and you'd seen Mexico. How strange was coal, Apollon Markovitch mused, unable to fall asleep, and how strange was a woman's soul. "The thoughts she has! Whoever would've thought anything like it!" Again he remembered Polina Pavlovna's blue house dress and this brought

melancholy—every single white flower in it stood out so clearly! He had been such a greenhorn then, entertaining dreams about organizing an expedition to explore the center of the earth. Huh!

Korolkov gave a deep sigh. Why wasn't it destined for them to have any children! At moments like this he'd have been able to tell his son, "Look, boy, they want your father in Moscow." Wouldn't his son have been proud of him! He sighed again: what strange crab kept creeping into his mind just to keep him awake …

2

Everybody was congratulating Korolkov, marvelling at his promotion. The chief of the Rescue Station, Fadeyev, an old friend from way back and a co-survivor of the Gorlov mine catastrophe, dragged him into his office. "It's amazing, absolutely amazing how you managed to do it," Fadeyev chuckled. "Who ever compiled for you the list of all the exploits and sent it up to Moscow? So help me I should try the same. Who did you send it to, Andrey Friedrichovitch himself?"

"What's the matter with you, Nicolai Tikhonovitch?" Korolkov said earnestly. "I only found out about it yesterday myself."

Fadeyev paid no attention. *"Sacre bleu,"* he said, shaking his head. "You mean to tell me they've done it all on their own? Here, 'In 1927 Apollon Markovitch Korolkov has faultlessly completed the conversion of a number of mines to gas production. In 1932 he has applied the experience of the Donbass to the largest mines of the Kuzbass.' " Fadeyev gave a sly wink, "That sonovogun hasn't forgotten anything, has he? It must've taken him two weeks to dig it out …"

Korolkov had piously hugged his chest. "Nicolai Tikhonovitch" he pleaded. "So help me it wasn't me. Believe me, whatever there was, and there was aplenty, I've somehow managed to forget it. True, after reading the order yesterday it came back to me. But that experience transfer had absolutely skipped my mind. Come on, you know me better than that?"

Fadeyev became serious. "All right, pal," he said, "you don't want to level with an old friend. To hell with you then."

"So you think I'm nothing but a dirty sonovogun," Korolkov flared up. Not waiting for a reply, he walked out, slamming the door so hard that the dredger cover came off the wall with a bang.

He was supposed to inspect the tiny mine 5-S. The bespattered gig waited for him at the office door. “Let’s go, Apollon Markovitch,” said the cabbie, an old disabled coal heaver, tossing aside the leather mantle. “I’ve brought you your kit.”

“I’ll need my torch, too,” Korolkov said. “I don’t like those 5-S torches. They always leak.”

“I’ve brought you your torch,” the cabbie replied. “Wrapped it in a rag.”

It was a muddy cart track that led to the mine, over heavy, moist soil covered with half-rotten clusters of last year’s foliage. Every here and there young grass greened in spots along little mounds on the roadside. White, pure clouds unpolluted by coal dust floated in the otherwise bright, sunny sky, and a warm breeze wafting from the village, but born far away on the Azov Sea, brought with it a moist, cheerful breath that made even the sad nag dilate her nostrils in joy.

The gig shook on the bumps but Korolkov was too deep in thought to notice it. I’m a lucky sonovogun after all, he mused. An interested friend must be having an eye on me, who knows, maybe following me even now … somewhere behind … Wondering, “Ey, what’re you going to do in 5-S, Apollon Markovitch?”

They arrived. Swinging his torch, Korolkov trudged toward the pile driver in the slushy mud that seemed to grab his feet and pull off his boots. How many hundreds upon hundreds of times had he been walking through miry mine yards like this, never for a moment stopping to consider how life might be in Moscow … how it would be to wear light polished shoes and walk along an asphalt sidewalk, enjoy the night life on the Boulevard or stop at a pavilion to listen to nice music while sipping a glass of tea with lemon? And yet, after having spent most of his years in god-forsaken mines, he had marvelled at Makeyevka’s town park and its people’s way of life when he first came.

The cage squeaked as the lift was going down. He got out and walked along the main drift until he reached the first inclined plane. The roar of a wagonette train hit his ears a few seconds after he heard the shrill whistle of the horse driver. Then carpenters with saws appeared and a little while later from behind the corner came out a timberman, looking up at the beams and swinging his axe.

With a sigh Korolkov went on his way. He looked over a few coal faces, checked the ventilator doors and examined the timbering in the new tunnel. Sighing again and groaning, he crawled into an air vent. The gas foreman in particular disliked his meticulous inspection routine of air vents. It was the peak of fastidiousness for an inspector to crawl through narrow openings where even a jet of air had a hard time coming through, they said.

Every air vent was in deplorable condition. Crawling on his belly along the narrow, blocked-up passage, the inspector painfully chafed his right hand. It didn't bother him, however. He liked to ensconce into the most inaccessible spots and talk aloud to himself. But this time he wasn't alone; right behind him softly followed the supervisor. "Take a breather, Apollon Markovitch," he advised. "A man your age shouldn't be crawling in places saturated with carbon dioxide."

Korolkov couldn't hold back his annoyance. "Why don't you mind your own business?" he snapped.

As soon as he rose to the surface, Apollon Markovitch went in to the office of the chief engineer Kosmatov, an old friend with whom he had spent six uneasy hours pinned against a coal face several years ago. He was met by a cackling laughter. "Look at you," Kosmatov said, shaking his head. "No sooner out of one trouble when you get into the next, five times prosecuted, enemies in every mine, and suddenly … your biography's plastered on the first page and Moscow has nothing but praise."

"You know, Stepan Trofimovitch," Korolkov said in reply, "I saw your east; the air vent's full of debris, the ventilation is lousy. Look, my friend, I'm going to close the whole section."

"Come off it," Kosmatov smiled. "What do you want? To throw the whole book at me?"

"I know the book," Korolkov nodded. "Three times it has been thrown at me. I'm going to write a little report and recommend ten days to fix it."

"Have a heart," Kosmatov begged, watching the pen in the inspector's coal-blackened fingers. "Give me at least fifteen; I've got to speed up production—the end of the month, you know."

Korolkov silently handed him the paper.

"You don't give me time to breathe," Kosmatov growled. A few seconds passed. "All right," he waved his hand cheerfully, "To hell with you. Go on,

be a company man … By the way, have they sent you the blueprints of the new apartment already? Central heating no doubt?"

Apollon Markovitch left his friend cackling and slapping his thighs. Why are they all making such fools of themselves, he thought angrily. Yet he began to realize that his mind was full of elation. The thoughts of past life, gone friends, and the hard, glorious work only fortified it.

"Yeah, yeah, Nikifor," he told the waiting cabbie. "That's how it is. Finally they remembered a work-horse engineer too—what's wrong with that?"

"Who else if not you," the cabbie agreed. "Oh, they know everything in Moscow. Yeah, they know … I remember a long time ago when two hundred seventy fellows were laid out after an explosion, the Tsar himself sent a telegram—so sorry he was."

"Who cares about a tsar anymore," Korolkov snorted. "So I'll go to Moscow and submit a project to the Kremlin to have a statue built to all engineers and miners who lost their lives in the pits. Also somebody ought to write a book about them, how they lived and worked … About all of them, so that somebody might remember …"

"Yeah," the cabbie solemnly agreed. "Somebody ought to write a book."

At home Apollon Markovitch found a surprise. Polina Pavlovina had dressed up as if it was somebody's birthday. She had on a blue dress he had never seen before, her face was made up, and her lips were the reddest red.

"What did you eat?" he asked. "Strawberries in March?" He felt good, though.

She looked at him with clear, cool eyes. "I'm not going to any Moscow," she declared.

"How's that?" he asked, making a wry face.

"What's the matter with you, you deaf?" she asked. "I'm not going to any Moscow," she repeated. "I know how *that'll* end."

There's a woman for you, he thought. To Karaganda she went, to Moscow she won't. Certainly he knew that nothing could aggravate the destructive force of a subterranean explosion as the least, minimal token of resistance. A blast wave might move quite harmlessly along empty drifts of a large section, but should it meet an obstacle, the lightest ventillation door, and the pressure would increase hundredfolds to create an unbelievable havoc.

As Polina Pavlovna, in her blue dress reminding him so much of that old house dress of bygone years, kept staring at him, Korolkov, the engineer, retreated for the first time from his blast theory. He decided the time had come to prevent an explosion from spreading along empty drifts. “Polya,” he said calmly, “you’re right in what you’re saying. But can you imagine what’s going to happen if I refuse an upright, honest invitation of the chief? He might bear me a grudge for the rest of his life, and you wouldn’t want that to happen, Polya!”

Polya didn’t explode.

1940

Once Upon a Morning

by Vitali Vassilevski

Vitali Vassilevski, author and critic, wrote a number of short stories published under the name Yesterday and Today, *in 1951. He also wrote a novel,* The Little Military Bone, *published in 1947, which deals with World War Two.*

Doctor Ivan Petrovitch Semyonov had been called out to the village Medvezhye to help a woman in childbirth. However, it wasn't until evening that he was able to tear himself away from the clinic and pedal out of town on his bicycle. Municipal employees in their shirt sleeves sat around boiling samovars in their front yards, sweating and drinking tea. "Hitting the dust again?" they asked in reply to his friendly nods.

Everybody in town knew the tall, lanky doctor with the fair, round beard. Ivan Petrovitch was born in the village Medvezhye, only about six *verst* from here. As one of the youngest students to graduate, he had begun to grow a beard while still in his last year at the Voronezh Medical Institute. A good doctor, he felt, ought to have the respect of his patients and they would have no respect for too young a physician. He loved to indulge in long conversations with them but the result was the opposite: they thought he was doing this from lack of experience. They'd go away dissatisfied and only because he was a native son, so to say, they treated him well. Petrovitch, they called him from behind his back, not doctor. But he didn't care.

Ivan Petrovitch pedalled down the river, along a narrow path. Every now and then he had to dismount and pull out long blades of grass caught in the

transmission. He didn't mind. Everything around was too pleasant—willows planted along the banks, meadows full of intoxicating honeysuckle and flocks of white clouds on the horizon. Ivan Petrovitch smiled. "How great, how great," he muttered in delight.

The woman had a difficult labor. He became tired and irritated. "Where's the hot water?" he kept scolding the old woman that assisted him. It was dawn when he was able to walk outside onto the porch and light a cigarette. It tasted sweet.

The woman's husband Andrey Zhuchkov and the *kolkhoz* chairman lay at the barn on the grass. They had been speaking in low voices, afraid to annoy him. "Congratulations, Andrey Mikhailovitch," the doctor shouted. "A son!"

Both men jumped up, looking sheepishly at Ivan Petrovitch. Andrey was embarrassed for having had to keep the doctor most of the night; his face was drawn, drops of perspiration glistened on his cheeks. His father, old Laryonitch, came up. "Ivan Petrovitch," he said, leaning over the wattled hedge. "Your papa'd have been proud of you." The old man began reminiscing; the doctor, too, remembered how he used to run around without pants, and how this very Laryonitch had caught him once in his orchard and boxed his ears. But now every villager would respectfully take his hat off when addressing him.

Not waiting for breakfast, the doctor got on his bicycle and was gone in a cloud of dust as Laryonitch and the others had been clanging on a piece of rail to wake up the village and announce the news that the baby was delivered by one of their own kind—Petrovitch.

Ivan Petrovitch rode along a path in a field of rye, listening to the murmur of the grain, watching it suddenly turn dark as the crimson sun that had just risen from the river hid behind a cloud. The scene made him reflect about those endless fields of rye, about his life and delivering babies (this was the two hundred and thirty-seventh time) and how their first cries made him pale and fearful, the same as ever, in spite of the cool, professional confidence he had acquired through years of experience.

He rode out of the field, but instead of following the dusty highway, he turned to the track along the river now enveloped by a milky-white mist. The splashes of perches were so loud that they sounded like stones jumping out and falling back into the water. They reminded him of the time he was a little boy and used to come here with Laryonitch and carry his tin with soil

and fat rain worms entwined into a clump. At the grove they'd stop, Laryonitch would spit on the bait and cast out, and then they'd sit down on the sand and fish in silence until hot midnoon.

At the former Tushkov farm of which only the orchard and a stone henge remained, the doctor saw the back of an old, ragged-looking man, sitting on his haunches at a low fire. At the sound of his bicycle the man raised his head; the face was dirty and the disheveled beard in clumped skeins, but Ivan Petrovitch recognized the beggar. It was Ankudinov, the one-time *kulak* who came back recently from Siberia and stayed with his son-in-law, the bathhouse keeper. Now a mendicant, this man had been his father's master for seventeen years. "Good morning, old timer," Ivan Petrovitch said, jumping off his bicycle.

"Good morning, if you ain't joking."

"Don't you recognize me?"

"How? A fog's been over my eyes for years," the old man said while stirring with a wooden spoon in the kettle which stood on glowing embers amid a rosy-colored flame of gnarled wood.

"I'm Semyonov, Vanka Semyonov," the doctor said. "Remember your laborer Pyotr? I'm his son."

"Pyotr? I remember lazy-bones Pyotr. …"

"You stinking beggar," Ivan Petrovitch said. "All his life my father travailed for you and never earned enough to buy himself a decent pair of pants, and now he's lazy-bones. You could never have enough, could you?"

"Yeah," the old man agreed. "I never could have enough. I was greedy, wanted to become rich quick."

"But you couldn't make it?"

"No, I couldn't. All because I was a fool. I should've sold everything and joined a *kolkhoz* somewhere close to Moscow. With money I'd have made it anywhere."

"They would've caught up with you."

"They probably would've," Ankudinov agreed meekly. "But then who knows? I might've been able to lose myself. Take my oldest, Ivan, where is he? You think they caught him? Nah, he's shrewd, Ivan. Like as not he managed to buy himself a good passport."

The old man removed the scum from the broth, straightened up and waved toward the yellowing fields at the river. "All this earth there, all of it

is mine," he declared.

"The tractors too?" the doctor sneered.

"I didn't buy them, but the soil's mine. I've bank drafts to show for it."

"So what're you going to do now?" the doctor asked.

"I'm going to be dyin'," Ankudinov sighed. "My time's about over; God's been calling me. I hear Him at night; he's right beside me, warm as a cat. Luke, he says to me, I'm waiting."

"You've mellowed," Ivan Petrovitch observed. "Yet there was a time. …"

"There was, there was," the old man shook his head. "There used to be mushroom pie but now there're handouts. Have pity on me."

"A billy goat once pitied a wolf. …"

"You compare me to a wolf?" the old man smiled, showing his rosy, toothless gums. "I've no bite left. You're a learned man, Vanya. I'd be ashamed to think of you as a billy goat. I'm afraid of you."

Ivan Petrovitch took a careful look at the old beggar. His dirty rags, the clumps of disheveled beard, and those trembling hands gave him a shudder. What a lonely old age, he thought, moving away from the fire. Not mounting his bicycle, he began to guide it slowly up the path. When he looked back, the fire had disappeared behind the osier bushes and only the odor of smoke could be almost seen spreading across the water. The doctor stopped where the bank turned steeply into a cliff; the water seemed to be hugging the shore, pushing out little waves onto the rocky ground but keeping driftwood and knobby branches swirling in foamy eddies.

Were it not for the Revolution, Ivan Petrovitch thought, I too might've been Ankudinov's laborer, getting it with the whip the same way as my father did. My father! What makes a man lose his dignity to the degree that he considers a slave's existence to be the normal life of a human being? My father never protested. Until he died he never stopped believing that Ankudinov was going to give him a reward for twenty years of labor: fifty rubles. He'd have bought a few acres, a horse, and grown richer and richer. … Just like Ankudinov.

It's either slave or master, as Chekhov said.

There was a noise in the bushes. Old Ankudinov pushed through the thicket. "You're still here, Vanya," he panted. "I thought you'd not get too far on this path."

“What happened?”

“Vanya,” the old man said, “your father once lost a leather whip I had. A good three-ruble whip it was. Listen, you give me back those three rubles.”

The doctor pulled out his wallet and fingered in it for a moment. “Here,” he said, giving Ankudinov a five-ruble bill. The old man took it nonchalantly, spit on it, and smiled. “I hope it isn’t your last,” he said, putting the bill away into his pouch. “You’ve got a lot of money, Vanya?”

“Quite a lot,” the doctor said, then added glumly, “vacation money. Saturday I’m going away into the Crimea.”

“Probably more’n a thousand?” the old man asked eagerly.

“Much more.”

“If I had that much, oh, ho—holy sinners, I’d take off for Moscow.”

“What would you be doing there?”

“I’d look for my son,” the old man said.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ivan Petrovitch waved his hand. “You don’t even know he’s there.”

A sly smile sprouted on Ankudinov’s shaggy face. “A father’s heart knows. I’d find him even blindfolded. Vanya, give me a smoke,” he suddenly said in a plaintive voice. “I’m so hungry for a smoke that I’ve a burning inside.”

Ivan Petrovitch bent over his bicycle and fished out a cigarette from his bag. “Here, Luke Kuzmitch, have a smoke,” he offered.

“God bless you,” the old man mumbled. He took the cigarette and stashed it away in his bosom.

“Why did you come back, Luke Kuzmitch?” the doctor asked. “Was it so bad there?”

“A dog came back to his kennel,” the old man tried to grin. “You’re right, Vanya, it isn’t bad there. But I came back while there’s still time,” he gave Ivan Petrovitch a cold stare. “While there’s still time. …”

“Time for what?” Ivan Petrovitch asked in amazement.

“They’ll be giving back the soil to the former owners,” the old man whispered mysteriously, drawing his tense, dirty face closer to the doctor. “I’m here waiting. I’ve got all the papers in order—deed, invoices, drafts an’ everything. They let me keep’em. I have’m in a secret place.”

“You’re crazy,” the doctor laughed merrily. “Waiting for yesterday?”

“That’s right. I’m waiting. You think Siberian hills could bridle me, an old war horse?” The old man turned around sharply, and before disappearing in the bushes he fiercely crunched the grass with his boots.

Everything became peaceful again. A crested lapwing flew low over the doctor’s head with a shrill wail, “Tee-veet,” then turned around, flaunting its white belly. The river breathed fast, rolling its rapid waters. Ivan Petrovitch moved on.

At the millhouse he undressed and took a running jump into the cool water. He hit the sandy bottom, gave a strong push with his legs and came up to the surface. Lying on his side and cleaving the water with his shoulder, he swam to shore.

The quiet morning, lightly colored by unhurried gurgling of whirls and gently reflected by the blue sky and foamy-white clouds, gave Ivan Petrovitch the clarity of thought he hadn’t had earlier. It was too early to forget the past because together with love there still was enough room in his heart for hate.

He dressed quickly and pedalled into town. A light fast drizzle caught him not far from the clinic, and when he reached the porch, the clouds hadn’t dispersed yet, and the morning promised to be breezeless and sultry.

1943

The Birthday

by Constantin Trenyev

Constantin Andreyevitch Trenyev, 1876-1945. Playwright and novelist. His novel Lubov' Yarovaya (Sterile Love), *published in 1926, has been played on the Soviet stage for many years. It won the Stalin prize in 1941.*

It was of little importance anymore that it had been a busy, productive week—meetings, a wood-procurement campaign, and a well-done job on the new draftees. Sitting at his office desk at the window, Ivan Dmitryevitch felt as depressed as the snow-covered square outside that sloped sharply toward the frozen river and the bluish line of forests right behind it.

This morning had started as noisily as any other morning. He had been opening mechanically a few official envelopes, trying to scan their contents and at the same time follow a heated argument between his assistant Shmarina and a fellow in a gay-colored tall hat. There was an envelope addressed to him personally; one look at its contents and the letters had turned red. The noise had suddenly stopped, the gay-colored hat had disappeared, and Ivan Dmitryevitch had thought he was going to faint. Mitya, his only son Mitya—was dead.

With a tremendous effort Ivan Dmitryevitch had managed to get a hold of himself. The noise had come back, Shmarina was still trying to prevent that fellow from making a scene, and nobody paid any attention to his heart-clamping sorrow. Nobody had seemed to notice his stupor. When somebody had walked up to his desk a while later for a reference extract, he had mechanically checked the books and issued it. How strange, he had

mused, people were going about their business, the job was still the same, the dark-green wall was as smudgy as ever, but Mitya—Mitya was not alive anymore. …

Ivan Dmitryevitch shuddered. A flood of sorrow broke out of his chest in a grave moan, and he saw through a haze the chairman of the draft board Yezhov come up to him. Yezhov said something, but Ivan Dmitryevitch didn't hear—he stared in stupor somewhere at the wall, at the ceiling, and at people without seeing anything.

"Five kopecks for your thoughts, uncle Vanya," Yezhov boomed gaily. "I bet, I know," he added in a semi-whisper, winking at Ivan Dmitryevitch's unrecognizing face. "Shmarina's on your mind. What if I tell Maria Nicolayevna?"

Ivan Dmitryevitch was unaware of Yezhov's chuckle or of his comradely nudge. "Yeah, yeah," he mumbled. "How can I tell her?" His wife had been sick for several weeks until a few days ago. She had been taken ill just before New Year and went back to work only yesterday. They had been trying to hide their worry from each other: there had been no letter from Mitya for a long time … and there still wasn't any. One week from now Mitya would have been twenty years old. …

Twenty years! Mitya's birthday used to be the most joyous, the most legal holiday in the year. How carefully each one of them had been preparing for that day! Maria Nicolayevna would make her best pie, guests would arrive with their little presents, and Mitya would have a little surprise for each parent. Now this would be the second time they celebrated Mitya's birthday without him. Last time he somehow managed to have a letter delivered on the very eve of his birthday. It had lain there on the festive table together with the pie and all the birthday presents, waiting for the guests to take their seats. It was read aloud again and again, every time a new guest had arrived, as if Mitya had been there with them.

There was their dear old friend Cyril Ilyitch! He had been listening in silence each time the letter was read, slightly twitching his barely grey walrus moustache and wiping off every now and then a tear from his blue goggle eyes. With a distraught look Cyril Ilyitch had tried to find something not too expensive to "break for luck." This was the way he had been expressing his happiness for years, but recently he had his qualms about it —dishes weren't easy to come by.

Ivan Dmitryevitch glanced at the clock on the wall: in three hours it would be five and he'd go home and find Maria Nicolayevna waiting for him with supper and then … he'd have to plunge the knife of the news into her. How cruel was life! He drew in a deep breath and began to work hecticly. He became absorbed, and when he looked at the clock again it was four. Why did time have to rush so catastrophically ahead?

The office day was over. Wasn't there anything that could keep him here for another hour? Was there no meeting, no pep talk this evening? Everybody was going home, leaving him alone at this terrible time. Ivan Dmitryevitch kept lingering at his desk.

He was alone now. Time to rise and go. He got up and then … like a cut tree he dropped, his head hitting the desk. Ivan Dmitryevitch gave vent to his grief in loud, incontrollable sobs.

On his way home he stopped at the city park. He passed the snow-covered Summer Theatre and turned onto a little square where benches had been swept cleanly. My God, he thought, how dear and familiar everything looked! On this very age-twisted, age-blackened bench he had once confessed his love to Maria Nicolayevna. The chestnuts had been blooming in bright clusters, shining like big chandeliers just lit in their honor. There had been the sweet aroma of verdure and a cool breeze from the river. And then … on that yonder bench under the linden they would sit, holding hands, while little Mitya's carriage had stood right by. Years passed, it was here that Mitya had been running around, playing, growing up. … How tall and handsome he was, always so pensive and serious. …

Life had flowed as it had to … trees had changed colors year after year, and modest dreams and wishes also had kept changing and changing. Only a short while ago, last summer it was, he had stopped at this park and reminisced. Those dear memories that tied him to this park had made his thoughts tender. Ivan Dmitryevitch had been able to see the end of the war, his son walking hand in hand with *his* girl, along this very alley … and sometime later Maria Nicolayevna and himself sitting again on this bench and enjoying the chatter of their little grandson. … In this new, endlessly dear life, their lives would have been flowing in a different form—not in a stormy, glittering current but in a quiet, yet deeply joyous stream.

But now the thread of life was cut. The spring was dry, the stream had stopped flowing, and everything around had died. And now he was going home to bring death into his wife's heart. For what reason? Was it that he

thought she knew how to face disaster, push it deep inside her heart where it would be met by her own soothing words and courage? Hadn't Maria Nicolayevna always been like that? "Why worry about Mitya's silence?" she had told him a few days ago. "People don't get letters for years, some don't get them at all. So what? What can one do by worrying anyway?"

He hadn't entirely approved of her reasoning though he could excuse her —she hadn't completely recovered from her illness. Why indeed worry her too soon? This morning, before leaving for work they had exchanged a few words about Mitya's coming birthday, and for the first time they had disagreed on one point: about inviting guests. Maria Nicolayevna hadn't wanted to invite anybody. "This isn't the time," she had said. He had been of a different opinion. "This is just the time," he had argued, "We ought to forget our worries and find our souls among friends." In the end, since she didn't feel well, they had decided to invite only Cyril Ilyitch … and nobody else.

When he walked out of the park gate marred by shreds of old posters, Ivan Dmitryevitch suddenly had the impression that years had separated this morning from this very minute. A century seemed to have passed in that half-hour he had spent on the bench! And the short walk to his apartment was different, too. The few blocks he'd usually cover in a brisk march; this time every step seemed to be difficult. He walked in a kind of tottering gait, stopping quite often, breathing hard, as if he was carrying a heavy load. People turned around to look at him. When the little three-window brown house showed up at last behind the street corner, and behind it the familiar white crowns of his home-grown apple trees, Ivan Dmitryevitch had made up his mind: no, he mustn't tell her tonight. Perhaps tomorrow, or better yet, after they've celebrated Mitya's day. He mustn't deprive her of the last bright day in her life. … There'll always be time to tell.....Perhaps he shouldn't mention it even to Cyril Ilyitch. Cyril Ilyitch was too impressionable; he might give himself away.

The unbearable load seemed to become lighter to carry. Ivan Dmitryevitch entered the house and dared have a good look at his wife's wan, drawn face. Her eyes had lost their luster; he painfully realized that she had grown much thinner and older. And this evening job now, why did she take it?

Maria Nicolayevna left right after supper and he pondered how difficult it was going to be to tell her the news. How was he going to live through it?

Where was he going to take the strength to raise a toast to Mitya's health, where? The ache hadn't grown duller as he had hoped it would this morning. Perhaps he should be sharing his sorrow with somebody. How could he bear his grief in silence when his heart wanted to shout out for the whole world to hear? Ivan Dmitryevitch decided to drop in on Cyril Ilyitch. In his little flat the two of them cried in long silence. Cyril Ilyitch agreed that it would be better not to overwhelm Maria Nicolayevna with the news until after the holiday.

What was the hurry anyway?

The birthday had drawn close. The horrible secret had to be carried over one more day. Ivan Dmitryevitch had never had any secrets from his wife, and now, how badly he wanted to postpone that moment, how badly!

It was morning. Maria Nicolayevna and he greeted each other tenderly and congratulated each other on Mitya's birthday. Then they left in a hurry, each one to his job. Although he had noticed no joy in his wife's sunken eyes, he thought there might have been a sparkle of a graceful if depressed spirit in them. After work, on his way home, he stopped for Cyril Ilyitch. "I won't be able to face her all by myself," he told him.

"Hello," he said to his wife, skimming her pale lips.

"Hello, Maria Nicolayevna," Cyril Ilyitch said, handing her a little bouquet. "This winter," he added, "begins to look like a harmless little orphan." Cyril Ilyitch bit his tongue and frowned as he sat at the table.

They toasted the birthday boy, the country, and the fighting armies. So far so good, Ivan Dmitryevitch thought … like in old times. In the dim kerosene lamp, the bouquet adorned Mitya's portrait, the night was clear and moonlight seeped through the lace curtains and stretched on the floor. They sat at the table, chatting about everything but Mitya. Ivan Dmitryevitch rose to do an errand for Maria Nicolayevna; he stepped into the moonshine path, and suddenly he moaned out. Doubling up as if in grave pain, he dropped to a chair, and covered his face with his hands. "Mitya's gone, gone," he mouthed mournfully, crying like a baby. "He's gone and won't pass this moon-path anymore. …"

By the time Maria Nicolayevna and the guest rushed up to him, Ivan Dmitryevitch had managed to recover. He was about to comfort his wife but she already stood in front of him with a glass of medicine, wiping her tears

and comforting him in an affectionate whisper, “It’s all right Vanya, it’s all right.”

Ivan Dmitryevitch glanced at Cyril Ilyitch staring through the window at the silver-snow dunes and wiping his tear-soaked moustache. “A whole week,” he whispered, “a whole week since the news came. … I just couldn’t. …”

There was a long silence. Then Maria Nicolayevna went to the chest of drawers. “Here,” she said, handing him a letter, “Mitya’s last. … It came before New Year. He asked me to read it to you. … Here, everything’s in it, Vanya.”

Ivan Dmitryevitch took the letter and was about to read, but his hands began to tremble. “You read it,” he said, giving it to Cyril Ilyitch. His friend put on the glasses and began to read aloud.

“Dear, dear Mama. Read this letter first by yourself (I’m afraid of Daddy’s heart), then I’ll tell you. I’m writing from a room into which the sun’s shining brightly. Everything around me is white—the walls, the ceiling, the sheets, and coats. Outside everything is white too; a white smoke rises over the white chimney. For some reason it brings back to my mind the white-blooming apple blossoms in our orchard.

“The light smoke rises to the sky in a gay column … but what has it got to do with me? Me—I’ve got to talk about life and death.

“Yes, dear Mom. It’s been the second year we step shoulder to shoulder. I’ve met her many times, and now I’ve met her once more. But this time we’re not going to part. Therefore, I’ll have to try to be brief because Death is hurrying me. She’s trying to confuse me. But let me forget Death for a while, let us speak about life.”

Cyril Ilyitch had been reading at an uneven clip, at times hard, at times soft, breaking off often in loud sobs. He’d stop, shake his silver-grey head, wipe off his glasses, and begin to read again. …

“Farewell,” he read, “my beloved. Please give my last regards to our friends and above all to our foremost, dear. …” Cyril Ilyitch couldn’t finish. Maria Nicolayevna took the letter from him. “There he came to us, our Mitya boy,” she said in a voice choked with tears. “Now we won’t part … for ever,” she added in a whisper, laying the letter carefully in the drawer.

The moon disappeared and Mitya’s day was coming to an end. As the chilly winter night drew on and on, the three friends sat at the little lamp,

talking in whispers, waiting for the crisp morning to arrive.

1957

Happiness Is Not Far Away

by Yevgenya Levakovskaya

Yevgenya Vladimirovna Levakovskaya-Loginova, born in 1914 in a white-collar family, a graduate of the Literary Institute, had her first book The Steppe, *published in 1938. Her memories of active participation in World War Two are fictionalized in the collection* It Was In Our Company.

The scouting platoon was celebrating. Its commander, Ilya Shirayev, had returned from the officers' training course with his first star. A mountain of spongy pancakes was piled up in the pan; ration lard and fried potatoes were spread on German leaflets. The guests were hooking up snacks with their pocket knives.

"So now you're an officer," Captain Tshernikhov, the commander of the automatic riflers company said to Ilya. "To your health, Second Lieutenant. Before you know it this star will be joined by another."

"Star or no star, our scouts're known throughout the whole division," Ilya suddenly felt like boasting. It wasn't like him—he never bragged. But nobody seemed to mind.

"Of course we've made a name for ourselves," Tshernikhov seriously acknowledged.

They clinked with the tin mugs. "Have a bite, Comrade Second Lieutenant," said Sergeant Fedka, passing Ilya the frying pan. Fedka, an experienced scout, had always liked to humble himself before Ilya who twice had notices written up about him in Sovinformbureau bulletins. Now he liked to flatter his commander with his new title.

“What’s this?” Ilya asked, sinking his strong teeth into a hot morsel.

“This? A hare, Comrade Second Lieutenant.”

“Are you sure it isn’t a rabbit?”

“No, siree!”

“And what’s this, a hare too?” Ilya pulled out a little wing.

“Oh this is a pigeon, a wild pigeon, Comrade Second Lieutenant.”

“Uh, uh,” Ilya started manacingly, flashing his green eyes. “I see you’ve been running loose here while I was away.” But he checked himself. After all, he thought, in a way I’m still new here. Slowly shaking his mug, he listened to Fedka and the others filling him in on the casualty list (there had been hard battles) and on all the regimental gossip. The decorations for the Baltic campaign had arrived—there was a medal of the Fatherland War, First Class, waiting for him. Vera, the medsister who replaced the recently killed medic, was apparently quite serious about the commander of the second battalion—they were planning to be discharged together.

Vera, Ilya thought, a nice girl, but what was she to him? As far as everybody was concerned this war would be over soon—everybody would go home, but where would he go? He had come back to the regiment today, well rested, caught up on his sleep, proud of his commission, his first star. During those four years he had been on the front he had never dreamed of anything; then at the courses he saw his wife almost nightly. The dreams were so tantalizing that he had begun to interpret them as an omen—there’d be a letter waiting for him in the regiment, he had thought. And today, as he was walking up to the dugout on the fourth post, he smiled. He had almost been able to see his wife’s firm, tiny handwriting with which her letters were packed.

“Sorry, Comrade Sergeant—sorry again, Comrade Second *Lieutenant”* he was told at post number four. “There’s no reply to your last inquiry. No word from your wife as yet. …”

Ilya couldn’t find peace of mind. The party was going on for a while but he hardly smiled. As usual, he was the first to hear Vera’s steps. A wave of fresh air rippled the veil of smoke inside the hut as she came in. Right away a seat was made free for her at the table—she had been with the regiment since its formation and was liked by everybody. Over her old, soiled tab on her pullover tunic she had a new, red ribbon.

“Got another scrape?” Ilya asked. “My, my, somebody must be praying hard for you.”

The moment she noticed Ilya’s sullen face, Vera knew she had come at an inopportune time. She thanked the boys for their treat and rose. “Anybody hasn’t been to the bath yet?” she asked.

“You’ve got time for that,” Fedka offered her a lard-covered pancake. “Sit down and have some fun.”

“Come on, have some fun,” Ilya added. “Of course, they aren’t as good as the batcom’s.” The moment he said it he knew he had blundered. The scouts became silent and Captain Tshernikov gave him a strange look. A year or two ago he would have been able to restrain himself.

“If you feel miserable why try to bite everybody’s head off?” Vera raised conciliatory eyes at him. She knew Ilya hadn’t received any letter yet. The room became so quiet that one could hear the crackle of the pasteboard in the trophy lampions.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Captain Tshernikhov said after Vera left. He got up. Everybody was getting ready to leave, too. Ilya lay down, covered himself with his sheepskin and fell asleep.

He was jostled up by Fedka. “Major Prostakov wants to see you, Comrade Second Lieutenant,” the sergeant said. Vice-politoff Prostakov was the political officer of the regiment. What does he want, Ilya thought, glancing at his watch. He had been under the impression it was late—it was only ten.

“You ought to wash, Comrade Second Lieutenant,” Fedka suggested. “Let’s go out and I’ll pour it on for you.”

It was bright moonlight, a little nippy. “On the head,” Ilya challenged, snorting into his cupped hands and setting his feet wide apart. The dugout felt hot after the cold head shower. “Fedka,” he asked, “you know what Prostakov wants?”

Fedka shrugged his shoulders. What if some of the festive menu was procured by the sergeant without the assistance of the regimental caterers, Ilya thought? What if the vice-politoff got wind of it? What a shame! He wanted to ask, but Fedka had such an innocent look on hs face that Ilya decided to ask for the vice-politoff’s dugout instead. Once again he checked his appearance and left.

Prostakov was alone. He was a stout fellow with a pale, swollen face and red eyelids—the kind of man who behaves in battle like an irrational fool, rising at the right moment and forcing those super-rational know-alls to follow them. He had come to the regiment way back on the Dnyeper in the Ukraine—everybody liked him.

"Sit down, Comrade Shirayev," Prostakov said after shaking Ilya's hand and congratulating him on his promotion. "I want to talk to you about your plan of action on German soil. You see," he continued after a pause, "I've learned that what you intend to do is drive the Germans knee-deep into the ground or pull their legs out. How do you matter-of-factly plan to go about it?"

Ilya felt a stone roll off his chest. So that's what it is, he thought. Fedka hadn't let him down after all. "And who took my happiness away, Comrade Major?" he smiled mirthlessly. "Only a man born blind doesn't know what happiness is. People feel sorry for him but what does he care! But the man who felt it, cherished it. …"

"We all knew happiness and cherished it," Prostakov interrupted him. "There are, of course, people here and there on whom it has dawned only now that it ever existed. But you, Comrade Shirayev, think for a moment, do you believe you can go it all by yourself?"

"When are you going to quit enlightening the likes of me, Comrade Major?" Ilya asked with a sharpness not permissible even to a master scout.

"Never!" was Prostakov's simple reply.

Ilya took another look at the major's tired, sickly face and felt ashamed. He wasn't the only one. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

"Have you been to the fourth?" the vice-politoff suddenly asked.

Ilya nodded.

"There's still hope. We'll make another inquiry. They'll start coming back from Germany now."

"She couldn't have," Ilya blurted vehemently, then stopped. His words had sounded cruel, even to himself. He had become callous to humane ideas and peacetime habits a long time ago, yet his mind couldn't reconcile itself to the thought that his beloved wife, the gentlest and dearest creature in the world, might have been plunged, too, into that terrible holocaust of war.

"She's going to be inquiring about you, too," Prostakov suggested with an alarming persistence, sensing that the moment of warm, down-to-earth

trust was rapidly slipping away. He knew he shouldn't have said it—in spite of his endurance powers Shirayev was a man in anguish. He tried to think of something else to say to undo the damage, but what? "Anything I can do?" he asked.

"I don't see what you can do, Comrade Major," Ilya said in a hollow voice, getting up.

"Well, at 23:00 report to the regiment commander," the vice-politoff said stiffly, checking his time. "We're moving back into the first echelon."

Prostakov was dissatisfied with himself. The conversation turned out to be a fiasco. Having lost all his family in Minsk, he knew how Shirayev must feel. It was not only Shirayev, but every soldier in the regiment might become a terror in his Nemesis once they crossed over onto German soil. The anguish of a whole nation had become an onus, pressing down on his shoulders, and no fine line could be drawn as to where his personal woe ended and the grief of the blood-stained Motherland started.

Ilya, too, was disturbed when he left the major. Nothing unusual had been said; it was just harder and harder to accept those "No letters" for an answer, especially when the end of the war seemed close at hand and everybody was readying to go home. Why did Prostakov say, "She's going to be inquiring?" Why wasn't she inquiring now? And why, indeed, hadn't it occurred to him that she, too, ought to have done some inquiring about her husband?

Now all suggestions, guesses, and reasons turned around like weather cocks to point in unison that it was easier to find something if one wanted to find it.

The regiment slept in the quiet forest. Ilya decided to enjoy the fresh air; he lay down on the snow-powdered ground at the side of his dugout. He inhaled deeply, to air the oppressive intoxication from his lungs. Tomorrow it would be back to the battles—that might be good. In a fight he could get rid of his anger and there'd be no time to remember it at all.

Above him, among the black shadows of the tree tops, glowered cold, bright stars. At home in the Far East they had seemed yellower, closer. At home in Kyakhta—a long, long time ago. …

Ilya's father, Anatoly Shirayev, had been a rich fur dealer in the Siberian trans-shipping town of Kyakhta. After his first wife died he took into his home a beautiful girl of mixed Buryat-Russian parentage. His fellow merchants who had esteemed only fair haired, buxom women never approved of Anatoly Shirayev's choice. Anatoly never married her—even after she bore him Ilya, his third son.

Ilya remembered his mother as a wrinkled old woman. She must have been pretty when she was young, he thought, contrasting the Asian crescent of brows, the long, bright-green eyes of Mongolian gods with the gentle background of an oval Russian face. He took after her, whereas his two older brothers were tall and red-haired like their father. They used to tease him with cat calls because of his malachite-colored eyes. Ilya thought of himself as homely.

There was Anisa, the daughter of a Trans-Baykal cossack. She was fair and often wore pink dresses. Ilya liked her. Fair and pink, that was all he thought of her.

But Anisa, echoing grown-ups, told him once that he was a "slant-eyed bastard" and should stop looking at her. He had been avoiding her for quite some time after that. Until one day he handed her a squirrel skin which he had tanned himself.

The skin must have felt good to her hands. "You've cat eyes," she said. "You must stop looking at me." Ilya watched her fair, little fingers caress the soft fur. Then Anisa threw the skin to the chain dog; the dog tore it to shreds.

Then the Revolution came. His mother died and his life with his brothers and father became unbearable. He was in everybody's way—a stocky, black-haired boy who wasn't allowed to sit at the table when his father had company. Ilya would go off wandering into the steppe, accompanied only by his silent, nine-year-old shadow, and stay there until the early hours of the morning. The far hills on the steppe horizon reminded him of a huge, sleeping beast. The farther from town he'd wander, the fewer were the thoughts of his father's business to follow him—as if they had been afraid of the wide spaces, of the free air and sun which were hard to catalog. The sun would be immense, dark-red and settle heavily into the steppe like into water. Night would fall fast without dusk. Succulent stars would appear low in the sky and soon they'd be consorted by a youthful moon sailing like a boat with raised prow and stern. Ilya would love to hum in the dusk, then

boom wistful Buryat songs which he might have heard from his grandfather years back. At times like these, songs would come up onto the surface of his memory like stars from an empty sky.

Coming home one night, long after midnight, Ilya as usual whistled from behind the fence to the two chained wolfhounds, which were let out after dark to run around the house on wires. They were very friendly to him, these shaggy, bearlike dogs. One of them, Hayda, he had cured of the mange all by himself. His brothers had been set to destroy the animal, but he had pleaded with them and his father. They had scoffed when he had patiently medicated Hayda with sheep liniment bartered from the veterinarian for skins. But how happy he had been to see the big dog coming to greet him.

Now, as he clambered over the fence, Ilya heard no clanking of chains nor any friendly canine panting. The house was dark. A faltering strip of light broke through the closed shutters and stretched into the yard, onto a pair of horses hitched onto a carriage. The wheel-horse restlessly stamped the ground with his left foreleg. It snorted noisily, leering into the corner of the yard, toward a dark, formless pile.

Ilya, too, gave a feral snort: a sharp odor of wheel pitch and the familiar, saline odor of blood was in the dark night air. He dashed to the corner of the yard and picked up the heavy, dear head by its short ears. As he let go of it, the head fell back with a limp thud; the dogs were still warm, the blood hadn't coagulated yet.

He was frantic. Up the porch he sprinted, into the house, into the hall. "Hayda," he howled, "Hayda's been axed to death. … And Murat too. Both of them axed to death!"

Overwhelmed by his grief, bubbling incoherently, Ilya had not noticed that his father and brothers were all dressed and ready to travel. He stared at them in stupor.

"You fool," his father said somberly but without anger, "get dressed. We're leaving. You wouldn't expect us to leave good dogs."

"Hayda!" the older brother sneered. "The world's in flames and all he thinks of are his dogs. At least you could go and wash your hands."

Only now, leaning against the doorpost, did Ilya notice that his hands were bloodstained. He slowly began to rub his sticky palms.

“No understand, huh?” the other brother noted with malignant gaiety, apparently amused at Ilya’s bewilderment. A moment later neither of them seemed to notice him any more. His father took an axe from the table and tested its edge with his finger. There was a moment’s hesitation, as the dim light of the kerosene lamp threw his dull reflection on the clean metal.

“Where is it?” the older brother asked, clearing his throat and raising the lamp in an impatient gesture. Shadows of people and potted fig plants darted silently on the walls. An unseen storm raged in the room.

“In the corner, under the second board,” the old man rasped, handing the axe reluctantly to the younger son.

“Step aside,” said the younger son, toying with the axe. The older didn’t immediately move out of the way. First he pulled up and loosened the floor board, then, freeing both his hands, he put the lamp on the table in one quick, cautious move. For a split second both brothers faced each other, as if ready to jump. In the light shining down on them their powerful jowls stood out clearly. As if on command they both bent down simultaneously; the board groaned and squeaked. A compact little bag, smelling raw and musty, was clutched by two pairs of hands and laid reluctantly on the table. The father nimbly loosened its neck—there was a heavy, lifeless murmur. A thick, short snake seemed to have slithered out; it stared at the people with hundreds of lusterless, yellow eyes of the gold coins it had disgorged.

Ilya’s father and brothers hastily divided the coins; each hid his share on his person. There were only a few coins left when his father called without turning around, “Ilya, take some.”

His brothers bristled; they glared resentfully at the old man. But old Shirayev rebuked them. “He’s your brother,” he said in a calm voice which Ilya didn’t recognize.

It seemed as if all of his terrible influence had melted together with the gold in their pockets. “I’m not coming with you,” he said proudly.

His father turned around and walked back to him. “Ilyusha, come with us, boy,” he said gently, peering into the flushed face of his youngest, the illegitimate one. Perhaps he suddenly recognized in it the features of the woman he had loved or of his own youth. Perhaps he realized that he had loved poorly and hadn’t known how to appreciate love—that he had always been too careful of what people might say about him, or too afraid of their

envy. He became aware, perhaps, that he had lived for others, not to himself, and was wondering now who and where those others were?

Ilya recoiled. He wasn't used to the pleading affection on the part of his father. And as he hesitated, waving his arms, the old man suddenly shuddered, as if he had just noticed the blood on the boy's hands. He cast a ponderous glance at the mutilated floor, at the despoiled table, and gave a deep sigh.

"Why're you pleading with this waif?" the older brother sternly admonished. "It's almost dawn, we haven't got too much time left." His voice carried no respect for his father.

The old man made no response.

According to custom they sat down for a few seconds. The brothers were the first to go outside. Ilya stared at his father's stooping back but could find no pity in his heart. The horses, tired of waiting, took off eagerly. And in the morning, trying not to look at the dead Hayda and Murat, not to listen to the worried crows overhead, Ilya locked the house and took the keys to the new authorities—a former Shirayev laborer.

The house was taken for the headquarters of the local Soviet and Ilya was sent to school—to do what he wanted most, breed expensive animals and grow rare trees.

Ilya would have probably never returned to Kyakhta had it not been for the black-memory year 1937, the year of turmoil and purges, when he, a young man of twenty-six had to tear himself away from his beloved wilderness of the forest reserve to prove that he had never had any part in his father's riches.

Even then, he would have left equipped with lifesaving certificates had it not been for the little girl whom he had given years back his first tanned pelt for its destruction. He met her in Kyakhta.

Of course, Anisa was no little girl any more. She was a young woman in the fullest bloom of her beauty, a beauty for which in times past Kyakhtan magnates used to pay big money. In Anisa's alabaster face, in her fabulously dreamy eyes, Ilya was pained to detect the unmasked terror of a baited animal. The despair in her eyes had determined his destiny. Her dowry, now limited to the name of her father who had perished with the armies of Baron Ungern, had attracted no suitors. Ilya married her and was joyously received into her home.

They lived with her mother. For a year or so he enjoyed the affectionate, solicitous treatment of a family head. He was madly in love with his wife and believed wholeheartedly that she was in love with him too.

It was June 1938. Anisa went to visit her sister in Dauria. Without her, the house felt empty, the nights were long. She came back, wearing a new dress, looking lovelier yet different. In the evening Ilya was first to retire to the bedroom; he waited and waited for her. He undressed, tried to read, but nothing came out of it. Another minute, she'd clean up the dishes, have another word with her mother and come upstairs, he told himself.

Finally Anisa came into the bedroom. His embrace was tender; fantasy is no substitute for reality, he thought, watching his dark-skinned hand caress her fair shoulder.

"All right, make it faster," she snapped. "Turn the lights off."

"Why?" he asked trustfully, still smiling, though her voice was strangely harsh.

She stared at him with a weird expression in her wide-open eyes, as if inviting him to delve into a place where he had had no admittance before. "Why?" she shouted out in revulsion, pushing him roughly aside. "Lord, what slanting eyes you have! Like a cat!"

Ilya sat quietly on the very edge of the bed. Slowly an icy chill began enveloping him from the back of his head to his bare feet. Anisa cried inconsolably—like a baby. He felt pity for her, helpless anger, but above all shame, unbearable shame. His fingers trembled as he tried hastily to button up his nightshirt.

Ilya's happiness had come to an end that night. He signed up for a long trip.

Anisa and her mother made an effort to sweeten the last few days in their house for him. "Patience's important," the old woman tried to comfort him. "Wait for your grain to be ground and flour will come." When it was time to leave Anisa went with him to the station.

The express train came in the evening. A penetrating Trans-Baykal wind blew up whirls of sand; it crunched on the teeth. Somewhere in the dark somebody was knocking on the wheels. The station signals were twinkling. Ilya spoke gently to his wife, patting her beautiful, plump hand. "Wait for me," he said. Though she responded affectionately, he had a strong

suspicion that she was anxious to catch her bus home. Perhaps she was chilly too; there wasn't really much to their parting.

From the trip he had sent Anisa a great deal of money. He had hopefully sent her a squirrel coat, and now, on his way home, among other things he was bringing her a blue polar fox.

The boat was steaming into the Upper Reaches of the Yenissey River. The passengers were gay, full of money, glad to get home after long work and months of loneliness. From Igarka many women were returning home after working on contract jobs. The voyage had been long; a few managed to marry, a few even remarried.

Ilya took pride in showing off his fox. The women gingerly caressed it with calloused hands, taking turns in trying it on in front of a broken mirror. "For your wife?" asked a tall, slender woman, nudging his shoulder. "You better put it away. You're so deep in thoughts that you don't hear anything. Put it away, there're all kinds of people on this boat." Then, watching him as he carefully tucked away the fox, she suddenly thrust her hands into the sleeves of her quilted jacket. "I'm chilly," she said.

Overcome by a desire for frankness, which occasionally happens with traveling people, Ilya told her a few things about himself and about Anisa. Then he became reticent, as he realized that she guessed even facts he'd rather not reveal. "Eh," he replied tersely to some of her questions, though he felt like telling her everything. He liked this woman—Tatyana; her language was devoid of the vulgarity other women passengers displayed. She must have seen better times, he conjectured, noticing that her tiny ears had been pierced but carried no earrings now.

One evening, after the other occupants of their quarters had wandered off, Ilya was left alone with Tatyana. In the dim light of a little lamp tremulous shadows made her face appear cold, her grey eyes dark and motionless. Only her platinum blond hair, gently crowding her high forehead, appeared as soft as ever. Having nothing else to do, he began to draw her out.

She was reluctant to talk at first. "I'm Russian," she said, playing with her fingers coupled on her knees. "I lived on the Ukraine, worked as a nurse then went along with my husband to Siberia." Tatyana crossed her legs and began to rock lightly to the tune of a cheerless waltz somebody was playing softly on an accordion behind the partition. There was silence for a moment before she resumed speaking. "Our relations went from bad to worse and

then I made up my mind to go to the Far North and work in construction. … I worked off my time and now I'm going to Ulan-Udé … to work as a nurse again. … That's all," she paused, shrugging her shoulders.

"How about him? What happened to your husband?" Ilya inquired.

"They took him away," she hitched her shoulders again.

"Why, without any charge?"

"Why without charge?" Tatyana smiled. "Forgery. Dissipation … you know," she suddenly began to talk fast, with fervor, leaning up to him. Her face, out of the shadows, looked youthfully excited. "You know, it seems I would have understood much better if he *had* debauched all that money. 'You mustn't open a window, heat's escaping, wood costs money,' he insisted. Couldn't understand that fresh air came *in* through that same open window. Of course, it was my fault that I couldn't figure him out. Yet, believe me, I couldn't bear to find out how far his stinginess was going to go. I'd try to convince him. 'I'm concerned,' he'd say, 'about tomorrow. You got to look ahead.' The trouble was that he looked ahead from the wrong end. There are such people. They look ahead only because 'yesterday' is gone and 'today' isn't what they'd like it to be. … They smother you."

Withdrawing into the shadows again, Tatyana unbuttoned her jacket and gave a deep sigh.

"Then why did you come with him?"

"I thought he'd change, he'd understand. Later … well, I should have been doing the leaving earlier, before he got into all that mess."

Ilya became very curious.

"So, now why do you go to Ulan-Udé and not back West?"

"I'm ashamed to go back to my relatives," she whispered. "They told me 'why go,' but I kept telling myself: I'll change him, I'll make him over, we'll be like other people. But no good. Therefore, as long as I'm not myself again, I don't want them to see me. I have to do it now all by myself. It was my vice, it'll be my virtue."

As her face moved out of the quivering shadows again, Ilya thought that neither its gentleness nor her low voice were consonant with the firmness of her words.

He studied Tatyana with an increasing sense of participating interest. He admired her fine fingers peeking out from the thick jacket sleeves. "Poor

Dovie Girl," he told himself.

"All right, enough of your questioning," Tatyana told him half-jokingly, half-angrily. She was first to get up, climb the ladder and go out on deck. The air was cool; the dark, heavy water growled overboard, rushing to get behind the stern.

"It's hard for a woman alone," Ilya said, standing beside her at the thin, thin railing. He didn't know how to express his sympathy. But, by the way she abruptly straightened up, he knew his remark had been inappropriate.

She doesn't like to be pitied, he thought approvingly.

"Please, don't pity me," she said, staring into the water. "The troubles are mine and I'll manage," she added softly, though stubbornly.

The wind coming from the prow danced in her uncovered hair until it unfastened a long strand and tossed it playfully into Ilya's face.

"It's chilly," for some reason he felt like whispering.

He went over to the weather side to shelter her from the wind and gently covered her with the flap of his sheepskin. She didn't try to move away. Clasping the cold railing firmly, as if she had been afraid of falling overboard, she stood there, her head bowed. Ilya was overcome by a sudden wave of tenderness toward her.

The boat steamed slowly up the river. Ilya was in no hurry now. He felt calm and happy in her presence. Her belief that one can fully repay a mistake, cast off its burden and recover to breathe again—freely and fully—made him feel strong.

"Poor Dovie Girl," he mused. "After suffering and suffering she voyages all by herself into a strange town, yet believes that everything will turn out fine. As if happiness was not behind but ahead of her."

He thought it was his duty to watch over her and show her as good a time as one could on this wretched steamer. At the same time, he also sensed that Tatyana in many ways was seriously interested in helping *him* out. A feeling of complete trust and indebtedness, which he had never experienced toward any woman before, rose in him toward her.

However, when the steamer was pulling up to the pier, when home and Anisa appeared tangibly close, his thoughts veered away from Tatyana. "Thank you," he told her as she indecisively reached him a piece of paper: her address in Ulan-Udé "I'll write you," he solemnly assured her,

pocketing the paper into his sheepskin. He had no intention of doing so however; all his thoughts lived for Anisa now.

Later, when he saw his wife, when he heard her voice, he simply forgot all about Tatyana. He forgot, as if not he but another man had been voyaging with her up the Yenissey.

Anisa looked more beautiful than ever—simply ravishing in the blue fox over her full shoulders. Beautiful, but aloof. Ilya tried not to pay any attention to the neighbors' innuendos.

Anisa used to keep his things in order—now she had to be reminded. His mitt got torn; he asked her to mend it, he asked her again; one morning, he got out the darning box and began to mend it himself. Anisa and his mother-in-law pretended not to see. He finished, went out and put the mitt into his pocket; he thought everybody was making fun of his unwomanly, clumsy stitches.

But that was a minor point which could have been overlooked if the main issue had still been alive—it wasn't. Love can be feigned, indifference can't. Ilya hurtfully complained to his wife one day. She was honestly surprised. "What do you want?" She asked. "I'm alive. What else do you want?" She repeated, arrogantly curious.

He was overcome by a painful anger toward this well-fed woman. "You're no wife, you're a whore," he insulted her for the first time in his life.

"You're right," she faced him boldly, her arms akimbo. "Do you think a decent woman would have agreed to live with you? If my father were alive, and things were different, how much do you think you would have seen of me, you Buryat bastard?"

She screamed, burst out in tears, and became red in the face. If it hadn't come from Anisa, Ilya would have found it amusing to listen to all that vituperative monologue hurled for no reason. But it came from his wife; the whole outburst was so savage that it had left him speechless. He wouldn't have been surprised if he had suddenly seen himself in the mirror, not as he knew himself now: robust, firm on his feet, a little pale perhaps on top of the solid, northern sunburn—but once again as the little, black-haired boy who wasn't allowed to sit at the table when his father had company.

He dressed in silence and left.

A wind coming from Mongolia drove little sand waves along the ground.

Ilya knew that if he didn't make his decision now he would never be able to look at himself again. He walked fast. He frowned in order not to have to look at the trees or houses, because the trees, houses, even the ground itself —everything was running back to her. Only the wind was on his side, it pushed him from behind in gusts: "Go on, go on."

"Where to?" He didn't know.

He was already outside of the town limits when a driver he knew called out to him. Wouldn't he like a lift to Ulan-Udé? Ilya jumped into the cab; he told the driver that he had a new assignment—as a matter of fact he did. He felt like smoking. While fumbling for a cigarette, he pulled out from his pocket the crumpled piece of paper with the address on it. There were no cigarettes, though. He returned the paper to its place and accepted a thin Chinese cigarette from the driver.

When Tatyana saw him enter the door, she blushed and rushed to meet him. Then one look into his unhappy eyes and she knew that he didn't come to her but had run away from his wife.

She didn't try to pry anything out of him, as if there was nothing unusual about his coming to her. She put the teakettle on the kerosene heater and began to cover the table. How poor her place looked after home! Ilya fumbled in his pockets but had to apologize for leaving his last ruble at home.

"I have some," she advised him simply as she saw him search for his money. She put on her beret and went out.

A dreary thought came to his mind: he would have liked to get drunk. But Tatyana didn't buy any vodka, though she had spent plenty on food. She was happy to treat him, without any fuss; she had even thought of cigarettes. He took a smoke and took his jacket off.

She made the bed and asked him if he wanted to lie down. "I have some work left to do," she said, putting out the top lights. The light of a shaded night lamp fell on the little table in a yellow, warm circle. She got out some books, but, of course, did no studying. He knew that she wanted to let him fall asleep.

When she came by the bed on tip-toes, he grasped her hand.

"Sit down please. …"

She sat down on the very edge.

“I’m beat, Tanya,” he muttered, “don’t be angry with me.”

“Don’t think of it, go to sleep.” She gingerly patted his fingers as if he were sick. He fell asleep.

When the generous Trans-Baykal sun came streaming through the dazzlingly transparent windowpanes and woke him up, he wondered where she had slept.

“I should have covered it,” she observed, “but I’ve got no blinds or curtains. I love to see the sky, night and day. Don’t you?”

The sun rays passed through her hair: it seemed now not platinum but golden blond, and she herself taller and handsomer than on the boat. It occurred to him that never before had he seen her in high heels.

Breakfast was ready; she was in a hurry to get to her job. She showed him where to leave the keys if he felt like going out. “If you feel like it,” she had said as if there were no question about his staying with her.

The sun and the brilliant, blue sky beamed into the hospitable window. Blunt and distraught, incapable of thinking or deciding for himself, he curiously examined his haven. No, this little room wasn’t that poor; it was rather spacious without all the inert mantles, embroideries, napkins and endless china figurines which he hated as much as he loved life.

And the little rug at his bedside wasn’t cheap, either! How wonderful it felt lying on the floor instead of looking down untouchably from the wall. Ilya also noticed expensive crystal flower vases. She feels secure already, Dovie Girl; he thought; people who live from hand to mouth don’t buy vases.

Her clothes were not gaudy but tasteful; they resembled their owner in a way. He was amazed to realize that even this morning, the morning which might turn out to be the most difficult in his life, the nearness of this dear, stubborn woman gave him great comfort. He could be so candid with her! Perhaps because her past was so hard. …

He opened the door for her, helped her take off her coat, hung it up too, then turning around, gave her a weak smile.

Seeing his guilty smile, noticing his tired face, drawn in the last twenty-four hours, she shivered. She looked a trifle disheveled and her face was pink from the fresh air.

“Stop tormenting yourself,” she told him firmly, as she dropped her down-soft scarf on the chair. “Please get this into your head: I don’t want

anything from you. There's nothing I expect from you, and there's nothing I want of you. Can't you see that?"

She had walked up to him and while talking held her arms on his shoulders, almost hugging him. There was no doubt in his mind, however, that she meant what she said; that the only thing she wished, like a mother, was that he stop suffering.

"Please don't," she suddenly blushed and reeled away as he tried to pull her to him. Then without saying anything else she pressed her cheek to his quilted jacket.

"Let's go away from here, Tanyusha," he suggested bluntly, tightly clenching his jowls. He caressed her hair and thought, no matter what, he had to get away from here, away from Kyakhta. He couldn't allow himself to cavil; he ought to forget everything.

As soon as Ilya went through the necessary formalities, Tatyana was also allowed to leave. They set out as husband and wife for Pripyatin in the Ukraine, where her relatives lived.

After the severe grip of the Trans-Baykal weather he was amazed at the slothful mildness of the Ukraine. As compared with the reserved Siberians, the people here seemed easygoing and friendly. Very soon he became chummy with his new relatives. Her uncle visited them on holidays for dinner. He liked to slap Ilya on his broad back and tell him, "That woman got herself a heck of a husband. Quite independent!"

But he'd invariably end the discussion like this: "By the way, she ain't bad either. It was her first husband that almost finished her off. But, in good hands. …"

"What are good hands, rough ones?" Ilya wondered with a smile.

That was the autumn before the war. They were sitting in the orchard. The two men sat behind a wooden table covered with a flowered oilskin cloth; Tatyana made herself comfortable on the bench, her legs pulled up and her back resting against her husband's. The sun had set; dusk was falling; the sky was cloudless and grand, turning thicker and growing into an emerald dark.

"Are your hands good?" Ilya asked again, gingerly turning his head—his back felt too warm and cozy to disturb it.

Tatyana's eyes lit up; her teeth simply sparkled as she laughed out. She stretched quietly, and briefly her cheek touched Ilya's. But then their backs

pulled apart, and she began to feel chilly.

“Tanyusha, please pick me a sour apple from the tree,” Unc asked with a robust yawn.

Laughing, she pranced down from the bench and gracefully ran to the apple tree. Ilya was right behind her. She decided to pick a few apples from the higher branches. Upwards flashed her tanned legs and her dainty slippers.

“Don’t jump, I’ll take you down.”

Ilya reached out and nimbly pulled her down. For a moment he held her up—he couldn’t have held Anisa that way; Anisa was a little taller than he, full and weighty. Tatyana felt like a feather.

“Dovie Girl,” he said, letting her down. “Just amazing how much spunk there is in this little you. Drop by drop and you get what you want.”

A beetle got into her hair; her fair skin glistened under the slipped shoulder strap of her bodice. He freed the beetle. She turned her dark face up at him, admiring him in silence with huge, strangely transparent eyes. He saw in them something he had never been able to see in Anisa’s eyes.

He kissed her on the lips—timidly, as if she weren’t his wife. Again, he peered into her eyes.

“Again,” she asked him softly. So softly that he could only guess what she had said.

That evening brought nothing out of the ordinary, however. After they had taken Unc home Tatyana semed rather edgy. She complained of being cold and sleepy. Ilya didn’t mind. He felt so light and good that night, so peacefully attuned with the full, quiet country, that had it not been for this dear load on his left arm he might have simply soared like a bird.

When war came, when he was called, she cried but didn’t let him see her tears. When time came to part she cuddled up to him. She looked so defenseless, had grown years older in a few days. “Please, as much as you can, watch yourself,” she implored. “If something, please … come back. No arms, no legs, anything … please come back. I’ll be waiting for you. …”

Being a good shot, hunter and pathfinder, Ilya was assigned to scouting. The new trade, the trade of war, he learned calmly, as conscientiously as ever. But he so longed for home; he had enjoyed so little of it!

Now, as they stood on the threshold of Germany, when his conviction grew stronger with each day that he would survive this war, a new obsession began to torment him: what if he, alive and unscathed, found out that there was nothing to come back to, nothing ahead of him? He'd curse destiny that had made him happy and for such a short time. He'd find himself struggling with a helpless kind of jealousy, seeing Tatyana so irresistible that she couldn't help having men drawn to her, adore her. Then doubts would give rise to fury, which was good in battle, but in those infrequent periods of quietude in between patrols, he'd feel like striking out against himself and against those around him.

3

The little frost was trying to firm up as the evening deepened. However, compared with the vigorous, Siberian cold, this winter was just a baby. Shaking himself like a big dog, Ilya got up from the ground and went to see the regiment commander.

The commander, a young major with nine decorations, presented him with the plan of operation, reading off with slow deliberation the names of German-populated points.

"There's the second echelon for you." Captain Tshernikhov whispered to Ilya.

"Of course, in the first echelon are the Germans, in the second are we."

The regiment commander didn't keep them long. For the first time, at least on the map, they were on German soil. The feeling of keen pride, just retribution, which was common to all of them, was so strong that it had supplanted all other feelings. Elated the same way as the others by the palpably close victory, Ilya was annoyed at the vice-politoff who suddenly switched him back to the agonizing fruitless thoughts: "We'll send another inquiry about your wife, Second Lieutenant," Prostakov had said, walking up to him. "Also, vou still remember our talk; take good care of your men."

Prostakov walked back to the regiment commander who apparently knew what it was all about.

"Well, what are you writing in your reports," the commander winked. "Is the political-moral condition in good shape?"

"You think of it as a joke, Ivan Semenitch," Prostakov sighed gravely, "but you should see how people become brutalized in four years. There are

some whose souls are so bleeding that you can't touch'em."

"You're the educated one, so go on heal those sick souls," the commander suggested, as he was leaving to inspect the sub-units. There wasn't much time left.

The enemy engaged them in a heavy battle on this side of the border.

Fedka was wounded. Getting down to his knees, Ilya unbuckled him and pulled down his wide trousers. The bowels were pushing out of his sinewy belly in a blue foam. "A swig of vodka, sarge. …" Fedka moaned, crumpling some withered leaves between his fingers and jerking his head.

Ilya poured him some vodka from the canteen and kissed him on his bloodless lips. Two scouts took Fedka to the rear.

The Germans withdrew in a hurry. …

The morning was overcast and grey as the regiment had fought its way across the border. Then, everything became silent—so silent that Ilya began to wonder: "Have they capitulated?" The scouts followed fresh caterpillar tracks of Russian tanks. They came to a steep bank overhanging a narrow, clear river; they passed a line of abandoned barges bearing long, unRussian names; they crossed the bridge to the other side. "There she is, the damn Nazi Germany." A freshly tar-painted legend screamed at them in sprawling black letters from the wall of the first two-storied building.

Slate houses capped with sharp red tile stretched out in two long files. Carts, bundles lay around in the street. Quilt down danced freely in the wind. Like snow it hugged the soil, the walls, and fences, but unlike snow it refused to melt, staying white as would snow on the face of a corpse.

A youthful scout, Fimotchka, reported to Ilya as Fedka's replacement.

"Not a soul, Comrade Second Lieutenant. The Gerries are gone."

They walked up the street, clinking their forged heels against the cobblestone. A corpse of a German officer was doubled over a low palisade, his hands and long hair sweeping the soil. It seemed the Nazi was bowing to his belt to welcome the entering Russian armies.

They caught up with the Germans toward evening. For a while the enemy was returning the fire, but soon he pulled back again. The regiment occupied a large village. The settlement, miraculously intact, almost untouched by artillery fire, looked peaceful and turned out to be almost empty. Its residents had fled in panic, leaving behind all their valuables. In

some cottages lamps were still burning and dishes with remnants of food were left on the tables.

"Eich-vier" Captain Tshernikhov spelled out its name for Vera. "Stopover. Let's feed the men; maybe they'll let us spend the night here. They've already picked a house for your medicos."

They walked together toward a single-storied, little house with the customary abandon of soldiers who'd occupy any enemy trench or any enemy-held building. Assisted by a corpsman, Vera hastily unfolded her uncomplicated household, looking forward to working for a change in daylight, under a roof, with her hands washed—instead of in an underground helter-skelter.

The windowpanes vibrated finely under the black masking paper when a battery of 120 mm. pulled by. Soon excitable voices outside slowly died away together with the unceasing stamping of feet.

Vera took real pleasure in leisurely washing her hands under the faucet and in wiping them bone-dry with a towel she got from the cupboard. Distraught and curious at the same time, she examined the German home. It was the first time in her life she had seen one. She was amused by the funny embroidery over a wide, wooden bed, bearing the sentence in tiny Gothic: "God, remain with us." Yet she was on the alert, and Tshernikhov knew why; Vera was waiting for somebody from the second battalion to come in and tell her that everything was O.K. there, that the batcom was alive.

"I heard they are digging in on the western fringe," Tshernikhov remarked. Then, he remembered Prostakov's request. "Vera, Prostakov wanted you to talk to Shirayev—when you got a chance. Of course, only when you got a chance. You know, he can't find his family, makes all kinds of mad threats. Everybody's mad," he stopped, shaking his head about the disquieting thought that occurred to him. Indeed, the soldiers had a reason to be mad, especially now when they were walking on the German soil.

When Vera had heard him mention "western fringe," which was manned by the second battalion, she joyously turned around—all the fatigue gone from her face. However, the rest of what Tshernikhov had to say had no cheer for her.

"What's the matter with your Shirayev? Is he a baby? Go take care of him," she pouted. "Why does everybody come to me? I'm as tired as hell, too."

“Oh, you are a woman,” Tshernikhov explained apologetically. “You women know how to talk.”

Tshernikhov and Vera had been serving in the regiment since its formation; they were used to and knew each other. In battle, in the trenches, or in march one doesn’t particularly care who his neighbors are—old or young. Now, however, amid the ordinary human utensils, he could even picture Vera as a woman—in a dress. When Tshernikhov gave her a non-military once-over, so to speak, and remembered all the five years they had been together, she shuddered: how could she not be tired.

“There’s sense for you,” Vera spouted off, “walk like a man, fight like a man, and should the need be—you’re a woman.”

In her raucous, husky voice there was a ring of tears. Tshernikhov was utterly shaken.

“We must end this war,” he stated flatly, as if Vera’s hurt and momentary weakness had just convinced him that this had to be done, that the only thing he had to do to end the war was to return to his company.

“Bring in the wounded!” He was already behind the door when he heard Vera’s normal voice ring out the “commanding,” as they used to joke in the regiment when she sent out the corpsman.

As he ambled to join his riflers, Tshernikhov was glad to see the little Bashkir liaison man of the second battalion, the flaps of his overcoat tucked up high, running up to the sanpoint house. Batcom two, apparently, was relaying his usual, terse message.

The scouts had entered the village with the second battalion. The first minutes or even hours after a victory the brew of success goes to one’s head and displaces all fatigue. Ilya felt hot; he felt no desire to eat or drink. Unsure of the enemy’s panicky retreat; distrustful of the quiet, dark windows; believing in nothing on this foreign soil—he was the first to rap with his rifle butt against the closed door of a solid-looking, squat house. It looked like a store. In the thickening dusk he could still make out mouth-watering, tightly-packed sausages and some alien, angular letters on the signboard.

The door didn’t give, but from the house Ilya could hear sounds—somebody was inside.

“Shall I let go at the windows,” Fimotchka eagerly suggested.

“No sense letting go,” Ilya drawled through clenched teeth. “You won’t hear a peep from them anyway.”

The door, though, was giving. Under force it creaked and fell off its hinges. Homey warmth and the odor of cooked meat burst forth to embrace them. “Get out,” Ilya shouted in the jargon he often used in interrogating identification prisoners, or “pigeons.” There was nobody to be seen in the semidarkness, but noises came from the next room. Beginning to lose his temper, Ilya cocked his automatic and headed toward the noise. Fimotchka swung at the second door from under which a dim light was slitting through —surprisingly, it gave easily.

The darkened room was large and cluttered, glowing with dying embers and dancing with locked-in shadows from the flickering light of a lamp which apparently had just been put on the table. Two of the trembling shadows, a man and a woman, seemed to have petrified in an erect pose the moment the scouts had broken in the door.

A black hole yawned in the buff floor, just below the table covered with a plush cloth. On it rings, bracelets sparkled and cried with brilliant tears next to a lusterless bundle of knives and forks feebly blinking in the poor lamp light.

The woman had been taking off an earring. She had frozen stiff in her motion—clutching her ear with both hands. She was rosy-skinned and fair-haired, dressed in a light housecoat which barely covered her shapely body. A moment later, coming out of her stupor, she darted forward and barred the table with herself, spreading her shapely arms. Her coat opened, exposing more of her semi-naked body to the scouts’ eyes. However, she didn’t care about herself, she was intent on defending her possessions.

Unquestionably, Ilya looked to them as the devil incarnated: a broad-jawed, green-eyed, squinting monster in a camouflage coat. He tore his eyes away from the woman and glanced at the man. What struck him was the German’s red hair and heavy, square jaw.

Suddenly, in a flash, this redhead, the hole in the floor, the scared shadows brought back to his memory the picture of his brothers and that frightful night of his childhood. He remembered again the dull glimmer of gold and the smell of blood. Slowly his automatic dropped.

Interpreting the indecision reflected on the face of the Russian soldier as favorable to her, the woman daringly made a step toward Ilya and at the

same time said something briefly to her husband. Not making any attempt to cover herself, she smiled. The meaning of her smile would have been obvious even to an inhabitant of another planet. Ilya received the message: just stamp your foot, yell out, and the redhead will tiptoe out of the room and close the door behind him.

But Ilya felt no desire for their bracelets nor for their wives. He suddenly felt a wave of physical nausea. He whirled around and walked out of the sausage-smelling house. The detachment reluctantly followed.

This encounter had disturbed him so much that he couldn't fall asleep after he set up his men for the night. The trauma of his past appeared to have survived here, on this foreign soil, lurking for its opportunity to poison him. He felt suffocating and tight inside. Dragging himself out, he strolled in the middle of the street, meticulously staying out of the shadows of the neat little houses carefully dressed in ivy. He felt he had to escape the putridity of his unhappy childhood which seemed to have burst forth this very evening, threatening to inundate him, smother him—as big and strong as he was.

Ilya's heart informed on itself in a kind of disquieting palpitation. There was a group of lightly-wounded men, their fresh bands looming white in the darkness; he asked them for the direction of the Sandet. He hadn't thought of the "pancake" slur until he came into the room and sat down on a free chair. Vera looked very busy; her iodine-stained fingers appeared to be moving with sure quickness, as if they had a mind of their own. It occurred to him that he shouldn't expect any favors from her; perhaps he shouldn't have come here at all. …

"Pour in half a glass," Vera ordered the corpsman who had a bottle of Popov's medicinal spirits in his hand. She took a glimpse at the pale, perspired face of the sergeant who lay on a stretcher, his legs splintered and bandaged up to his pelvis. The sergeant avidly drank down the liquid—she always had it on hand, unlike other medical officers who kept running out of it. She rightly believed that it was good to soothe pain and give extra strength to the badly wounded. The sergeant quieted down, too, by the time she was finishing the bandages on the next man's shoulder.

The regiment's job was done for a while but in this little house work was going on at full speed. Vera's natural efficiency, her gentle voice—the voice she always used with the wounded men—and the imperturbable serenity of the silent corpsman, all that had a transquilizing effect on Ilya. He was

beginning to feel good, and then … he took a look in the room and discovered two soldiers sitting to the right of him—not of his own kind but Germans. Two unarmed, impossibly filthy Germans sitting there—as calmly as they pleased. Only an act of witchcraft, he thought, could have put Germans in this room. Vera's so busy that she doesn't even seem them, he said to himself. Another second and he would have kicked them out the door when Vera beckoned to the older one, the one who had a rag bandaged around his head. *"Davaii,"* she said, pointing to the chair in front of her. She said no more than that word, a word which every German knew by now.

"Vera!" Ilya reproachfully reminded her.

"POW's," she replied without lifting her eyes. She began to change the bandages on the man's head. The German was very patient although he must have been in pain. However, the moment he heard her clank the glass ampule and saw her fill a syringe, he reeled back in such overt terror that even the phlegmatic corpsman raised his eyebrows in amazement.

"Tod," the German rasped, pointing at the hypodermic. His unshaven, dirty face became earth-grey.

"Go to hell," Vera told him in a tired voice, not caring whether he understood or not. "Why would I have wasted bandages on you? *Davaii,* for God's sakes."

However, when she peered into his face she realized that he was so scared that he was ready to collapse. For a second she lost her confidence—his reaction had been quite unexpected—then she recovered.

"Look stupid, it's only a tetanus vaccine," she assured him, slightly pricking her left arm below the elbow, barely squeezing the plunger.

The German watched in fascination as the needle disappeared under the skin of his arm. Raising apologetically at Vera the whites of his deep-sunk eyes, he made an attempt at a smile—but couldn't quite make it. When it was all over, he got up, rattled off softly a remark to his younger companion in German, and dropped heavily to his own chair. Under the clean bandage his wet cap looked even dirtier.

Ilya rolled up a smoke for himself and waited resentfully for the prisoners to be taken away.

But nobody came for them. He noticed that the older prisoner hungrily stared at the smoking tobacco, not having the courage to look up at his face.

Mad at himself, without even glancing at the German, Ilya silently reached him his shag-packed tin and a newspaper strip. The German carefully picked a pinch, just enough for a thin, thin smoke and abruptly blurted in Russian, “Thank you.”

His Russian words sounded so weird that even Vera tore her mind away for a moment from the last soldier she was attending.

The German was quick to explain, “I was in Russia—the last war; in prison.”

He spoke with an accent, but quite fluently.

“You were, yet you wanted more,” Ilya chuckled malevolently.

For the first time the German looked straight at him. He was at least forty, maybe older. The ordinary, middle-aged man with large, coarse hands, horny fingernails, and a tired face covered with weeks-old stubble. He obviously had felt keenly that the reticence of the Russian was an expression of hostility toward him.

“No, I didn’t want more,” he replied softly. His tone of voice had a touch of dignity to it. Perhaps, he remembered himself as he once was: unbegrimed, unmilitarized, a self-respecting, industrious man who, indeed, hadn’t wanted this war.

“Why are you hanging around here?” Ilya asked in an angry drawl.

“They’ll come for us. They promised they would,” the German apologized, glancing from Vera to Ilya and back again. “They’ll take us, they will.”

Ilya realized that the prisoners were afraid to go out into the street by themselves; they were afraid to be met by Russian soldiers.

Ilya’s feeling of hateful revulsion of the enemy was for some strange reason replaced by a curious involvement. It couldn’t have been friendliness—there was no room for warm feelings in this house where a Russian soldier was dying on a stretcher. Yet, it was a completely new feeling—something like the absence of enmity—a feeling hard to grasp. Making half a turn toward him, the German glanced at Ilya again, and Ilya was positive that both of them had the same thought on their mind. He even forgot about his quarrel with Vera and wasn’t at all surprised when she requested him amicably, “Ilya, boy, will you please take a look in the chest; maybe you can dig out a pair of men’s underwear. It’s cold outside; they are all wet and filthy like pigs.”

Ilya walked up to the chest and began to dig in it haphazardly, tossing out onto the floor every unsuitable thing. He stopped to admire a well-worn, neat chemise bearing signs of multiple mendings. As a matter of fact, he thought at first that this was a kind of embroidery. He marvelled at the precise neatness of the mendings. Then, he found that every single piece of apparel was speckled up with such meticulously done squares. “Took off. …” he smirked, collecting the whole pile from the floor and he put it back into the chest.

“Where did they go, these idiots?”

Eventually, men’s underwear was found. The prisoners changed hastily, ashamed of their thin, neglected bodies, and a short time later a carefree, little soldier from headquarters came for them.

Vera was so tired that she could hardly stand on her feet. Ilya thought it wiser not to bother her and left. Immense fatigue began to take hold of him too; he couldn’t wait to get to the pile of straw procured by the nimble Fimotchka.

It’s such a long, long time before you’re allowed to rest on the front lines, he thought, that when it comes, it’s so, so short. At least now, the progress was much faster, and before he knew it, he’d be in the rear again.

Toward dawn, from God knows where, German civilians made their entry into the village. They looked glum and confused. A window opened and from it a white sheet was hoisted. Ilya thought they wouldn’t have the guts to keep it. But the sheet remained there hanging. Later, an old face appeared behind it, timidly peeking at the Russians and hopefully watching the other windows. And then, many shutters began to open and white sheets began to crawl out.

“They are giving up, the lice,” a soldier gleefully shouted.

From behind sheets and pillowcases of all the windows, German men and women, mostly old people, began to look out, trying to smile, wave, behave as if they had just been waiting for this joyous opportunity, the entry of Russian soldiers into their village.

The scouts left the village behind, plunging into an accurately planted, but monotonously alien forest. They followed their leader at a fast pace. Each scout was engulfed in his own thoughts, about his homeland, and paid no attention to the lovely, loveless scenery all around.

Vera moved with the battalion. She responded to Ilya's greeting with a nod of her head. The brisk, energetic pace of his platoon coming by made her think that this uneventful march was not going to last too long, that it wouldn't be a bad idea to pick up another sanitary kit. She decided on the spur of the moment to get out and wait for the sancom, to fill up so to say, on the march. She got out of the column and sat down on the roadside ferns.

Soon the sancom lorries came along. Vera recognized the old, lazy good-for-nothing gelding, "The Ally," as they called him, who'd never quicken his pace no matter how heavy the artillery fire.

The corpsman walked up to the lorry and pulled up the tarpaulin. While he was filling up his spare kit with all kinds of bandaging materials, "The Ally" kept his pace. Vera walked with Lusia, the pretty medsister from the sancom, a gay flapper who in comparison with her dressed like a doll (Lusia never had to crawl on her belly nor lie on the ground). Her quaint, box-calf boots had a sparkle; her military coat tailored in an officer's fashion was spic and span.

Babbling like a brook and carried away with happiness, Lusia boasted of the long letter she had written home last evening; how proud her mother would be to learn that her daughter was writing from the enemy's lair.

Having filled in Vera on all the details of her letter, Lusia also remembered that the liaison had been from in the division and brought a letter for Scout Shirayev. An open letter it was, and all the girls in the company had read it and cried—it was so touching. At the next halt it should be handed over to him.

"His wife," Lusia chirped excitedly. "Apparently, she had no time to evacuate. She joined the guerillas, and all the time she's been looking for him. She too, was awarded the medal of the Fatherland War, second class. She even sent a newspaper clipping from the place where her family is. She wants everybody who knows to tell her and help her find him. So touching, so touching …"

"Lord," Vera breathed deeply, "gimme that letter, will you!"

The letter closed with: "And if he is not with you, please write me, Comrades. Also, please return the clipping—I have no other and I want to send it and write everywhere until I find him."

Carefully nestling the letter amid the bandages, Vera got up onto the road. She began to run as fast as she could, trying to hold the pouches from

flapping against her sides. She ran ahead to catch up with the advancing regiment.

She caught up with the third battalion; then, her strength failed her. She knew she couldn't do it by herself—together, with the others, she would. The letter was rushed ahead, from hand to hand, from company to company until it reached the scouting platoon, somewhere in front of everybody.

As soon as Ilya saw the familiar, fine letters packed into tight lines, he felt the blood rushing away from his face and his cheeks turning ice-cold. He even forgot that instead of reading while marching, reading and stumbling, he might have been allowed to break out of the column. Next, from cold he turned hot, so hot that he had to loosen his collar; he was so foolishly careful about it as though the most important thing of all was not to lose the button. He read and re-read the letters; he re-read the newspaper clipping in which *her* name and *his* were underlined in red.

The regiment kept moving on. His platoon moved silently ahead, guessing everything, not asking anything.

That's how it was. While he had had his anxieties, moments of despair and doubts, the other heart had striven toward him with even greater force, perhaps. He sensed her timorous doubts in between her modest lines: "He must be looking for me too …"

"Must be? Silly Dovie Girl," Ilya mused, choking up from tenderness and forgetting his own doubts of not so long ago, and his unusually hurtful jealousy that seemed now so absurd he would be ashamed to tell anybody about it or even admit it to himself.

He also felt a little remorseful; why did he search for his beloved in places where things were peaceful? Why had he indulged in all kinds of conjectures and never thought of perusing the honor rosters? Perhaps, had he believed in his spouse without reservations, he would have started from the rosters.

Time, however, did not wait. An order reached the head of the column … the same way the letter had, from company to company …

"The commander of the scouting platoon to the regiment commander!"

"Well, there goes our rest," Fimotchka quipped, adjusting the automatic slung across his neck—it had needed no adjusting. "They want a 'pigeon' no doubt."

Unable to hide his happiness now, Ilya flashed his white teeth in a grin. “Cut out the gab,” he pretended sternness. With a smile on his face he walked back, along the roadside, against the current of the marching columns.

The war wasn’t a matter of years any longer; these would be the last battles that stood between him and peace. Ilya was confident in the future. As he went to receive his new assignment he was happy.

1951

The "Cleclecks"

by Anna Valtseva

Anna Valtseva, born Anna Valius, in 1916. Reporter and writer. Her travelogue Yenisei, Yenisei *appeared in 1963. She visited the United States in 1965.*

The flock had been coming down the hilly meadow in a wide column, but when it reached the dusty road the geese began to align themselves in a single file and cross in a true gooselike fashion. On the other side, where the meadow sloped toward the river, the geese were falling again into rows of three or fours, whereas the rear, spread wide over the bright-green grass, kept honking in low voices and patiently waiting their turn to cross the road in a single file.

"Just like infantry," the smallish, thin stranger marvelled. He had been standing at the road, in the shade of a tall oak, reluctant to disturb the birds. "How smartly they realign on the march," he said aloud.

"They listen to their leader. There 'ee is, way a'ead," a feminine voice advised.

He turned around. Behind the low wattled hedge full of drying pots, pans and colanders spiked on sticks, stood a tall, aged woman whose silver-grey hair still had a few jet-black skeins. As the stranger made a step toward her and startled the geese into a dazzling-white, gaggling flutter, the woman slowly turned around and walked back to the cottage, to shucking beans. It made him feel embarrassed; when the last goose had risen and winged across the road, the stranger threw his knapsack off his shoulders, leaned against the oak, and slid down to the ground. In the fields around him the

sunshine and the shadows seemed to be playing a game of hide-and-seek, as sunlit streaks of clouds a little farther away—over a crest of forests—kept changing shape from minute to minute.

The stranger listened: crowns of the trees rustled in the breeze; somewhere in the village to his right a motor rattled. The woman still shucked beans, flipping the seeds into a pot in front of her, throwing the pods to another at her side, and the dried-up legumes into a third. Her strong, full arms moved with sureness and energy.

Suddenly there was a heavy flutter above their heads. Three long-legged baby birds stood up in a nest on the cottage thatch, craning their necks, beating their wings, and clacking. From the direction of the river, a big, white-and-black bird came floating toward the village, circled above the cottage and alighted heavily on the roof.

"Storks," the stranger shouted. "I'll be darned, storks!"

"By the books its storks all right," the old woman shouted back. "But 'ere we call 'em 'clecleck.' Nothing but cleclecks. On the Lower Dyneper where I come from they call 'em 'black-buttons,' nothing but 'blackbuttons.' "

"Oh, I know," the stranger said in a loud voice. "There's plenty of them in the Ukraine, but here in the Voronezh country? This is the first time I've seen them."

The woman hugged the pot at the rim, and pressing it to her chest so that the beans wouldn't spill, she walked back to the hedge. "We've got only one couple 'ere," she said, "but before that there was none. During the war, it was forty-three or forty-four … No, I think it was forty-three because the Germans was still in the Ukraine, one couple of them came to us 'ere. The war probably did it. They came after the Fast, right on the eve of May first. Why they picked my cottage and not the next one I'll never know. They came and began to make a nest as noisy as you please. Then, of course, laid some eggs too … 'Ave a look how she takes care of them, what a mother!"

The mother stork had been feeding her offspring. Dexterously using her beak and talons, she tore apart the frog she had brought, stuffing the pieces into the open mouths of her babies, making sure that each one of them was fed. When the last morsel was gone, she stalked away to the chimney, looking in all directions and completely ignoring her progeny. "Resting

from ’er chores,” the old woman laughed, “or lookin’ for ’er ’usband—just like humans.”

“An interesting species,” the stranger observed.

“There’s quite a story about these birds,” the woman said after a moment of silence. She took a good look at the stranger. She liked his dark, wavy hair, his fair forehead divided by two thin wrinkles, and the blue, rather sad eyes. No more than thirty, she thought.

“What kind of story?” he asked.

“Come into the yard,” she gestured. “I’ll treat you to a glass of nice, fresh milk.”

“I’d appreciate.” He nimbly hurdled over the hedge and perched on the bench at the square table firmly dug into the ground. The old woman brought a pitcher full of milk and a glass. “Take’s much as you like,” she said, moving up the glass closer to him. “I don’t know your name or surname …”

“They call me Anton.”

He opened his knapsack and got out of it some bread, cheese, and a hunk of kelbasa. After cutting it into neat slices, he offered some to his hostess. She declined. “You’re single, I gather,” she said.

“How did you guess?”

“A wife would’ve packed in pastry’n fried chicken for’er man t’take … Comin’ t’stay ’ere for a short while?”

“No,” Anton replied, pouring himself some milk. “For a *long* while. I’ve come to work here. But I’m curious about those … cleclecks, what’s the story?”

The old woman had been gazing pensively at the roof. “The story’s this,” she began. “You see, they came to us one year, then next, an’ the third year the clecleck female comes by ’erself. She begins to fix ’er nest… drags up more sticks, clay, ’orse dung. Patches, knocks with ’er beak, but then … ev’ry now’n then she stops, stares somewhere an’ cries … it tears your ’eart out.

“Then one day she’s gone … to find ’er mate, I suppose. Two weeks go by, nothing … Then one morning, I see, she’s back an’ with’er a brand new mate. She lays one egg, it’s too late for more, and begin to ’atch it. You should’ve seen ’ow lovie-dovie that ersatz mate of ’ers was!” The old woman laughed heartily. “ ’ee’d prune’r, pinch’r all over, drag in poods

o'frogs, keep fixin'er nest … My God, you'd 'ave thought it was their 'oneymoon."

Anton looked up at the birds with renewed interest. The babies stalked around the nest, lifting their red feet high like ballet dancers, squatting or pruning themselves with their beaks. One chick started pruning its neck with its foot—like a kitten. Their mother, her head turned toward the river, stood motionless at the chimney, paying no attention to her offspring.

"Anton," the old woman declared, "you're a good man. I can tell a good man right away by the way 'ee looks at cattle or fowl. There's all kinds'n kinds o' people."

There's more to come to her story, Anton thought, waiting for his hostess to pick up her thread of thought.

"Anton, you know, I've got a daughter," the old woman said, emphasizing the last syllable. "Sure enough I 'ad sons too, but now only the two o'us widow-orphans are left. 'er 'usband was killed the first year o'the war; she 'adn't lived with 'im more than a year … if that. There was a baby too, they couldn't save'im … died. My daughter's a nice girl …just too shy …

"Around forty-five," the old woman went on, "a fellow came 'ere to the *kolkhoz* … Young, full o'pep 'ee was; 'is fightin' days were over and there were so few men around … 'ee was elected vice-chairman of the *kolkhoz.* Then 'ee began to court my daughter, Dusya. She wanted to know what I thought. What could I tell'er? I 'ated to see'er widowed so long, so … 'ee came over to live with us. But 'ee brought no 'appiness. A strange man 'ee was, 'adn't seen anything like'im in ages. Always on the outs with somebody … and selfish! My daughter pouts an' pouts …

"And so, my son," the old woman dropped her beans and walked up to Anton, "one morning somethin' went on between'em; what exactly I don't know … I 'appened to be busy with the cows, 'ee came running out of the chamber and began to pull on his boots—right on this bench you're sittin' now. Sin wanted that 'ee look up: there on the roof the man-clecleck was showin' loving care to 'is wife who sat in the nest 'atchin' the eggs. That fool began to shake like mad. 'You tryin' to rile me,' 'ee yells. 'I'll show'ye.' 'ee looks around then picks up a brick and aims right at the birds. 'Don't' I screamed in from the barn. Dusya, too, came out runnin'. 'Don't you dare,' she scolds 'er 'usband. Some'ow we managed to take the brick

away from'im … After that Dusya brought out 'is suitcase an' asked'im to leave."

"Then what?" Anton asked.

" 'ee left. My Dusya, she's only shy to a point. When 'is job was taken away from 'im, 'ee didn't like it and left our village."

"No," Anton explained, "I meant what happened to Dusya?"

" 'er? Nothing. She's around. As our *kolkhoz* became bigger'n bigger they made 'er steward in the neighborin' village. She lives there now and comes 'ome only on Sundays, an' some Sunday she don't even come either. An 'ard workin' girl she is, my Dusya, always was," the old woman added pensively.

"She's probably pretty, your Dusya?" Anton asked softly after a moment of silence.

"Well, what shall I tell you?" the old woman smiled. "She's not a beauty, but she 'as somethin' that'll you draw you to 'er. Everybody says it. See for youself—she 'as suitors no end. But now she'll think twice before she'll say yes again …" the old woman paused. "Still I think she's too shy …"

Anton didn't quite understand what it was about Dusya that struck her mother as shy but he preferred not to ask. He got up, thanked his hostess for her hospitality and began to tie up his knapsack. "Tell me, son," she suddenly asked, "you were sayin' you came to work 'ere. Why so few belongin's?"

Anton explained that he left his baggage in the truck that had picked him up at the railway station. They had trouble getting started and then the motor kept conking out, so he had decided to come the rest of the way by foot. "The driver will bring the rest of my things," he assured her.

"The sta-a-shon?" the old woman drawled. And then she shot out a fast question: "You were riding with Semyon?"

"I believe that was his name. Why?"

"Never mind," she said in reply. "You goin' to see the management now? The chairman's away for a few days."

"Will I be able to see somebody else in authority?" Anton asked.

The old woman smiled. "If you won't find anybody there, sit down and wait. Somebody'll show up. Go on. You can leave your bag 'ere."

Anton was more than pleased at her invitation. He made sure that the documents were in his pocket, asked for the shortest way to the *kolkhoz*

office and left. He had barely turned the corner when the knocking of the motor made him stop. “Semyon,” he heard the old woman’s forceful voice, “were you the one to go to the station to bring the new agronomist?”

“Yes, Ma’am, Daria Timofyeyevna,” Semyon reported.

“Yes, Ma’am,” the old woman scoffed. “So where is ’ee then?”

“Well Aunt Daria, it was this way,” Semyon was about to explain.

“You’ve got no ounce of sense, Semyon,” she scolded. “ ’ow could you ask a complete stranger to crawl under the machine? ’is jacket was all covered with dust. Were you too lazy to fix the motor yourself?”

“I didn’t ask him, Aunt Daria, honest,” Semyon apologized. “He volunteered.”

“Volunteered!” the old woman scoffed again. “If I know you … Get busy an’ bring in ’is suitcase. ’ee’s goin’ to lodge ’ere.”

“But the chairman said …”

“The chairman says many things,” she snapped. “Come on, ’urry. I’ve got to leave for the MTF.”

Anton laughed to himself and went on his way.

* * *

In the afternoon Anton lay down for a nap and when he woke up it was already dusk. He was about to get up when he heard a slight noise behind the partition that divided the spacious chamber, separating his room from the hostess’. A not too bright light shining through the chintz curtain allowed him to see the outline of a young feminine figure bent over the sewing machine. Then he saw Aunt Daria enter. “Daughter,” she whispered, “I’ve fried a chicken for you. Will you do me the favor an’ ’ave some?”

“Later, later, Mama,” the young woman answered. “I want to finish first this jacket for Maryasha. I can’t drag it on for another week. She wants to wear it tonight.”

“Dusya, you can’t be both,” Aunt Daria scolded in a whisper. “Either you’re a steward or a seamstress!”

“There isn’t much to do here,” Dusya laughed out. “On the machine I could do it in no time, but I don’t feel right waking the man.”

Anton thought he should tell them that he was awake. But the pleasant sensation he had, lying in the dusk, listening to the soft voice of this

woman, Dusya, made him linger … and listen.

"Well, 'Ow are things goin', Dusya?" Daria Timofyeyevna asked in a low voice.

"It's all right now, Mama. But at first, when they gave me the list of my crew and I didn't know anybody by name, where they lived, what I can expect from them—I *was* scared. Just do the best you can … in a village you don't know!"

"So you fell on your face, Dusya …"

"Doesn't matter if I did," Dusya laughed. "The most important thing is that I've no trouble now."

"Was Pyotr Grigoryevitch of any assistance?"

"He was, others too. They're all good folks; they've treated me very well."

"Sure. They see 'ow little you spare yourself. 'ow about Vera, you know, Mikhailovna? Is she good to you?"

"Very good. She treats Mariana and me as if she'd raised us from childhood."

"She's a wonderful woman," Aunt Daria mused in a warm voice. "I've a little present for 'er, some lard. Don't forget to take it."

"She doesn't need any."

"Don't matter. A present's a present. But, Dusya, don't let 'er do the washin' for you. Bring it 'ere, I'll do it. Now rest a little. What else is there?"

"Nothing." Dusya cut the thread with her teeth. As she rose, it suddenly became lighter. She had been blocking off the lamp.

" 'ow about Nicolai—you know, Nicolayevitch?" Aunt Daria probed cautiously. "Is 'e seein' you?"

"Sometimes."

There was a moment of silence after which the old woman left for the kitchen and Dusya switched on the radio. It took a while for the tubes to warm up. A distant, barely audible song wafted in:

> Full, oh full'o wonders,
> Is Nature's mighty flow …

“Snow White,” Dusya said to herself and got busy again with her stitching. A moment later Aunt Daria came in again. “Vera, you-know, Mikhailovna praises ’im ’ighly,” she whispered, sitting beside her daughter. “She says, ’ee’s quite independent.”

“They all praise him.”

“And ’ow about you? What do you think?”

“I don’t know, Mama.” As Dusya reached out for the scissors on the table, a shade flitted over the curtain. “He was showing me his little girl’s snapshot.”

“ ’ow does she look?”

“She’s cute; a happy-looking girl.”

“Poor child,” Aunt Daria sighed. “Poor, little orphan, Dusya, it isn’t ’er fault that ’er mother died. She needs somebody to take care of’er.”

“I know,” Dusya, too, sighed. “She has eyebrows like two thin silk threads. She lives with her grandmother now. ‘Just say the word,’ Nicolai Nicolayevitch tells me, ‘and we’ll bring her here. She needs a mother, and you could make a wonderful mother for her.’ “ Dusya heaved another deep sigh. “Our little Mitya would’ve been two years older by now.”

“Don’t ’ee drink, Nicolai, you know, Nicolayevitch?” Aunt Daria asked after some silence.

“He does from time to time. I asked him about it. ‘Don’t worry, Dusya,’ he assured me. ‘I never drank before and I won’t again once you’re with me.’ He’s got no home, no family, he drinks from loneliness.”

“That’s possible,” Aunt Daria agreed. “It ’appens this way, Dusya. But I’d advise you to ’ave another thought ’bout it.”

“I haven’t decided yet, Mama. I’m still thinking.”

Something in the kitchen crackled, something sizzled. Aunt Daria rose hastily. “But the child,” she said, walking out. “It isn’t ’er fault; she needs tender lovin’ care.”

While Dusya bent again over her stitching, Anton lay behind the partition, gazing into the darkness, wondering how she looked, this daughter of Aunt Daria’s. He knew already so much about her that he began to be concerned as to how things were going to turn out with her, with that Nicolai Nicolayevitch, and that little girl with the silken thin brows. How about his own future? Would he be able to find a home here, among those people who were only a little more than strangers? Would he figure in their

lives? That woman behind the partition, probably no older than he, is she wise in deciding to tie her life with a man's for the third time?

His reflections were interrupted by merry noises. Two young women broke into the room. "My outfit ready?" one of them asked in a throaty voice.

"Quiet Mariasha!" Aunt Daria hissed from the kitchen. "We've a lodger now, the new agronomist. 'ee's asleep, traveled all night."

"Is he young?" Mariana asked gaily, without lowering her voice. "If he's young he won't wake up for nothing. How's my jacket, Dusya?"

"Only the buttons left to sew on. What's your fancy, white or red?"

"Nothing but red! I want to make sure they match my earrings."

"White ones would be more modest," Dusya timidly suggested.

"Who needs modesty?" the other girl remarked. "She's not an old woman."

Mariana traipsed around the chamber and suddenly began improvising to the music floating in from the radio:

> "Hey, you dearie, friend of mine,
> Let me give you please a cue:
> Stop your mopin', stop your cryin',
> 'cause my love is still with you."

The other girl chimed in:

> "Not in dancin' but in ploughin'
> It is always you'n me,
> Never higher, never lower,
> Nothing but equality."

"Bravo, Lyonka," Dusya shouted. "Now you, Mariana, it's your turn."

Mariana knocked her heels against the floor and whooped:

> "Hey, you lassies, time to flirt,
> A new agronomist has come.
> Strike a friendship, be alert,
> An' perhaps there will be fun."

A loud spontaneous giggle followed, and then—silence. “Be quiet, all of you,” Aunt Daria chided.

“Don’t worry, he’s still asleep,” Mariana laughed. “If he wasn’t wouldn’t he’ve come out?”

They waited. But Anton smiled and decided to keep up the pretense.

“Well, he won’t, who cares,” Mariana snorted. “Just let him not try to take a peek while I try my jacket.”

They all began to talk. Somebody said that the same fellows who brought the movie last time were here again. Somebody suggested that Mariana flirt a little and they’d all get free tickets. “What’s the matter with you girls,” Mariana pretended annoyance. “I’ve enough money earned to buy myself a ticket.”

“Mariasha,” Lyonka quipped. “You know who I saw at the fair yesterday —that crush of yours?”

“Him, Fingers?” Mariana laughed. “Oh, why didn’t I go with you? By the way, girls, I want to sell last year’s wheat. I have a yen for a woolen custom-made suit in blue’n white stripes. Anybody know how wheat’s selling now?”

“The price’s quite low, Mariana.”

“There it goes. Mother keeps saying, wait, it’ll go up. Yeah, to heck it will. Soon enough nobody’ll want it.”

They all laughed. “Let’s try your jacket,” Dusya suggested.

“All right, but make sure, girls, that nobody ogles my beauty,” Mariana warned. For a while, as the other two were whispering to each other, she was silent. “Listen to this,” she broke in, “we had a plane come to fertilize our wheat and I decided to take a ride. That no-good pilot ties me with a belt and over the ravine he turns wheels-up and gives me the scare of my life.”

They all laughed. “Mariana,” Aunt Daria asked. “Are you going to take a kitten from my litter? They can see already.”

“Wait till the moon’s nice’n young, Aunt Daria,” Mariana sighed. “No, I’ve got no luck in life—not even with kittens. No husband; took already three kittens, they all either died or got lost.”

Everybody laughed again. “If I had a husband,” Mariana said in a loud voice, “I’d bear him five kids.”

“How about those who have husbands and still no kids,” Lyonka challenged.

“That’s not fair, girls,” Mariana insisted. “Just look how beautiful I am.”

“Look at that jacket,” Lyonka marveled. “That Dusya has hands of gold. What a pity they made her steward.”

“We are all happy about it,” Mariana declared. “She’s the first steward in years who gets things done.”

“Oh, stop it,” Dusya objected.

“All right, let’s go, girls,” Mariana chanted.

“Where to?” Aunt Daria shouted. “Dusya ’asn’t ’ad time to eat yet. As soon as she came she scrubbed the floor and sat down to your jacket. Wait till she eats. Don’t worry, she’ll catch up with you.”

Mariana and her friend left. It became quiet. “Eat, daughtie,” Aunt Daria said affectionately, bringing in the fried chicken. Over the radio a muffled voice was declaring his love to Snow White. Dusya ate in silence. “Mom,” she asked, almost in a whisper, “do you know if the Kuznetsovs have sold that curtain lace?”

The old woman gasped. “Made up your mind, Dusya?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“I have. I just can’t see that little girl …”

“You can see best for yourself, daughter,” Aunt Daria said. “As far as the curtain lace goes … I’ll find out for you today.”

Dusya finished her meal in silence and left, softly shutting the door behind her. Anton turned around to the wall and closed his eyes.

* * *

In the morning the chairman of the *kolkhoz* and Pyotr Grigoryevitch, the party secretary, came to get acquainted with Anton. With them was a ruddy, heavy-set man who, the chairman said, was the senior livestock technician of the neighboring state *kolkhoz.* They all went outside. The storks were making noise on the roof.

“Now since we have our own agronomist we’ll go places,” the chairman beamed. He told Anton that he was planning to sow new crops. He sounded like an intelligent, energetic man, easy to work with. His enthusiasm transferred itself to Anton. Pyotr Grigoryevitch talked more about people.

“We’ve new blood now,” he said. Anton remembered Dusya and turned around.

Two women stood on the threshold of the cottage. One—small, fair-haired, with hazel eyes standing out darkly against her pale face, had a small, stern mouth; the other—in a white blouse with red buttons played with her braid of black hair. Seeing they were the object of the men’s attention, the two girls came down.

“Yevdokia Vasilyevna, steward,” the fair-haired woman introduced herself, reaching out to Anton a small, firm hand. The other girl just said hello. And then she laughed out. “My, my, you’re quite a heavy sleeper, Comrade Agronomist.”

“You are Mariana,” Anton blurted out. Unable to tear his eyes away from her pretty, proud-featured face, he thought of yesterday.

“Now, on second thought, you aren’t such a heavy sleeper,” Mariana chuckled.

Dusya got into a conversation with the chairman and Pyotr Grigoryevitch, but now and then she’d glance up at Anton, at Mariana, then drop her eyes and continue talking. The livestock technician hadn’t said a word all that time. He sat on the bench, staring at the ground and drawing in the sand with a stick.

“Let’s go and see our crew,” Dusya exclaimed.

“All right, let’s,” the chairman agreed.

“We all won’t fit in the car,” Pyotr Grigoryevitch warned.

“Comrade Agronomist and me will walk ahead,” Mariana addressed Anton. “Is it all right with you, Comrade Agronomist?”

“Sure, sure,” Anton was quick to consent. He had been looking at her, a smile on his face, unaware of his smile.

“Nicolai Nicolayevitch,” he suddenly heard Dusya calling out. “Would you mind coming inside for a moment?” The livestock technician rose from the bench. So that’s who he is, Anton thought. Now she’s going to tell him.

…

“So are we going or not, Comrade Agronomist?” Mariana asked coquetishly. Anton opened the wicket for her but before leaving the yard he looked back again. Dusya stood in the doorway to let the livestock technician pass, her gaze wistfully fixed on them.

Now she's going to tell him, Anton said to himself, reluctant to leave. He heard Mariana's gay laughter; he turned around and slammed the wicket. "Scat, scat," Mariana shouted at the geese crowding the road. Fluttering heavily, they winged toward the river like grey and white clouds.

* * *

"Nicolai Nicolayevitch," Dusya said as soon as they were inside. "Please forgive me that I took so long to make up my mind. I have now; I'm afraid I have to tell you very frankly not to wait in vain. I cannot marry you, Nicolai Nicolayevitch."

As the livestock technician stepped from foot to foot, not saying anything, Dusya continued: "You're a good man, Nicolai Nicolayevitch. I have nothing against you, and I'm very, very sorry for your little girl. … But I just cannot marry you."

Dusya paused, waiting for him to say something, but he maintained his silence. "There's no love between us, Nicolai Nicolayevitch," she resumed again, "so what's the use," she sighed and looked down. "Maybe I'll regret it some day. But please you have to forgive and excuse me."

Nicolai Nicolayevitch stood for a while, then bowed in silence, and left.

Dusya sat down and put her head on the cool sewing-machine stand. "No," she uttered aloud. "No, I won't regret it."

She got up and walked outside. The chairman and Pyotr Grigoryevitch were still in the yard, watching the father stork teaching his offspring to fly. The old clecleck fluttered his wings, pushed away from the roof and flew up. The young clecleck also fluttered its wings but was afraid to take off. The chairman and Pyotr Grigoryevitch laughed.

Ahead of them, in the cloud of dust raised by the departed flock of geese, some sparrows were taking a merry bath. Dusya walked up to the two men. "Let's go, Pyotr Grigoryevitch," she said. "We don't want our new agronomist to lose his way, do we?"

1958

Tsat Mozambique

by Tatyana Taess

Tatyana Nicolayevna Taess (Sosoyura), born in 1906, graduated from the Odessa State Conservatory in 1927. Her collection of short stories, The Long Road, *appeared in 1951, followed by another collection,* The Chief Editor *in 1956. Her favorite theme—moral problems resulting from routine life.*

Aunt Polya was the second-floor stewardess.

She was a corpulent, middle-aged woman with big feet clad in man's shoes. "The Devil from Radki," the chambermaids called her. Aunt Polya had an obsession for cleanliness, a tempestuous passion which had been striking even in Radki, the village she hailed from. It was a known fact that Radkian housewives whitewashed their ovens daily after each dinner; while she had lived in Radki, Aunt Polya used to whitewash not only the oven but also the walls of her cottage. No Radkian woman had ever been that dedicated.

Aunt Polya had left Radki twenty-five years ago, yet her passion was as unabated as the first day she came into this little inn. Every morning she personally supervised her young chambermaids as they scrubbed the hall and each room. She made them polish the windowpanes until they sparkled; first she'd walk up and make a few imperceptible, circular swings with her rag; then she'd step back and examine the job with the most critical eye—squinting like a painter who had just put on the last touch to his masterpiece—and the glass would have to appear as transparently weightless as a sun ray.

The inn had been built for *kolkhoz* farmers who'd come to Moscow for the Agricultural Exhibition. Aunt Polya's floor was the milkmaids' dormitory. They'd come in late spring, bringing with them their record milk-yielding cows, and leave in late fall after the exhibition closed. They were good tenants, these serious steppe denizens. In the course of a summer Aunt Polya usually managed to become good friends with most of them. In the first evenings, when they'd return tired from the exhibition, she'd bring them kettles with hot water and tea before they even asked for it. The milkmaids would enjoy their tea and invite the stewardess to partake. Aunt Polya would at first decline, just to be polite, then sit down and get herself a cup. She'd have no trouble keeping up with their drinking habits—gulping down from three to four huge bellied cups as big as milk pails—while discussing events of the day at the exhibition.

And there would always be events galore. … Visitors would be crowding the cow station every day from morning till night, asking questions, making all kinds of notes in their little notebooks. There'd be fussing and bustling and the milkmaids would suffer watching their protégées become nervous under unfamiliar conditions, losing their appetites and their milk.

This spring it had been Xenya Parfenovna who got upset more than anybody else. Xenya was a round, vivacious little woman from the *kolkhoz* "The Red Ray." One evening, the moment she entered the room, she threw off her city slippers (to let her feet breathe freely) and began to spout off. "They put her in the middle," Xenya began telling excitedly, wiping off her chubby cheeks, "folks sittin' all around on chairs, like in a circus, lights turned on, even movie people're there to take pitchers. … Then they say to me, 'Parfenovna, will you please demonstrate electromilking for us.' I try, but she don't yield, my cow; stands there like a blob but no milk. I wished we both dropped dead on the spot."

A few gulps of tea, Xenya agitated her pink toes rapidly under the table and concluded grievously, "Whoever heard of milking a cow in a circus?"

Aunt Polya had tried to comfort her. "Don't get so upset, Xenya. I've been here many a year, and every year milkmaids have to go through a helluva time for a few days before the cows get used to it. Later, before you know it, you'll forget all about it."

There was a silent, sinuous woman from the Trans-Volga country lodging in the same corner room. She had been shaking her head in between sips of tea as Xenya was unburdening herself but said nothing. That woman

had brought a camel to the exhibition. Aunt Polya had made a special trip to see it. All the camel did was stand there, stretch its neck and spit. A haughty head that camel had, like a peacock, though no bigger than a snake's. Aunt Polya had walked around it several times and yet hadn't been able to understand why nature created such a bizarre thing. But the reticent Volga woman had adored her pet to the point of getting up every night and groping her way through the darkened exhibition grounds to make sure that her camel had everything it wanted.

Several weeks went by; the summer was almost half over when a sudden order came: all rooms were to be vacated and the milkmaids transferred to another dormitory, in another inn. Subsequently, Ivan Nifontitch, the manager, gathered all the employees and declared that the inn was assigned to house delegates to the International Youth Festival.

The second-floor stewardess was not an illiterate woman. She listened to the radio every morning and had heard so much about that festival that she thought she knew all there was to know about it. However, when it was announced that festival delegates were going to live in this inn, on her floor, she became so excited that her knees buckled under her. At the meeting, she sat poker-faced and stern as usual, her starched kerchief bound tightly over her dark hair without a trace of grey, trying not to give away her nervousness. Only when the manager droned in his boring voice, "We shall fight for cleanliness, Comrades," did Aunt Polya stir and shout out for the whole hall to hear, "You ain't talkin' to children, Ivan Nifontitch."

She came home full of elation, bursting to share her thoughts with her daughter. But Marina was getting ready to go out to the movies with her husband. She listened for a while, sitting in front of the mirror, dressed in nothing but a blue slip and bra while little Gnatick played with her curlers. "It's interesting," Marina said, "they'll even come from Venezuela."

Venezuela? Aunt Polya had never heard of it. Assuming that her daughter made a remark only for the sake of saying something and wasn't interested in what her mother had to say, Aunt Polya felt hurt. She thumped out in her man's shoes and went to the kitchen to prepare supper.

Time passed; every day Aunt Polya expected the new guests to arrive but the inn remained empty. The rooms sparkled with the flawless cleanliness of scoured boats, and a large dining room improvised on the lawn under a canvas tent was vacant too. On a nearby street crossing a gay, wooden effigy of a little man in a cap had been put up, and under its pointing hand

there was a sign in a foreign language: KHOTEL. That's how the place is called now, Aunt Polya thought. She liked the sound—so unfamiliarly important! Yet, she couldn't shake off that fear that they'd run out of delegates before it came to her *"khotel."*

At last rumors began to spread that the other inns (or *khotels)* next to the exhibition grounds were filling up. Nobody had seen the newcomers as yet, but the news had rolled up to the second floor. The stewardess' duties ended at six o'clock. She could hardly wait. The moment the night shift came to relieve her, she rushed to cast a military eye at the file of chambermaids lined up for inspection, and hurried out into the drab street. Here she stopped—the din was as heavy as in a railway station.

Several identical yellow buses were lined up in a goose-file. Curiosity seekers crowded the sidewalk, youngsters kept diving in and out, and old women from faraway alleys had come to have a look at the strangers. Aunt Polya haughtily pursed her lips and walked up to the first bus. What she saw made her shudder.

Dark-skinned, frail-looking lads in light jackets that looked like ladies' blouses, and scrawny girls in tight pants, with curly, short-cut hair were noisily unloading their baggage. There were shouts and laughter until the last suitcase and knapsack was unloaded, until everybody threw his luggage over his shoulder, and went off toward his *"khotel,"* curiously glancing around.

The stewardess walked up to the next bus. Bare-kneed fellows in plaid skirts, fuzzy-cheeked and wholesome, were coming out unhurriedly. One of them put a pipe into his mouth and began to wail like a blindman at a fair; somebody else blew a trumpet. One blue-eyed, ruddy-cheeked girl kept shouting "hello" to the on-lookers—one could have thought she was talking into a telephone.

Another bus came. All of its passengers wore identical tall, red hats with tassels that looked exactly like the dwarfs' in Gnatick's fable books. Then came another; a fat guy in short leather pants and a feather in his hat climbed out backwards. A little, red-haired boy tore away from the group of youngsters and ran up to him. "Here," he offered the foreigner a badge bearing an emblem.

"O," the fatso exclaimed eagerly, grabbing the badge. "O," he repeated, taking off a trinket from his lapel and giving it to the boy. The boy rushed back to his gang, triumphantly clutching the trinket in his hand.

The noise and the unfamiliar chatter gave Aunt Polya a sharp pain under her shoulder blades. It suddenly occurred to her that while she had been standing here guests might have arrived at her inn. This thought made her clatter back so fast that she was amazed at her speed.

The guests for her *"khotel,"* however, didn't arrive until next morning.

Aunt Polya was in her office when she heard the sputtering of the motor under the window. She adjusted the kerchief on her head and walked out into the hall. The buzzing of voices came up from the vestibule. The stewardess leaned over the railing and looked down—her heart stopped beating.

A woman in a loose, white robe with a slit cut out was coming up the stairs. Her head looked like a lambskin—covered with curly, short-cut hair. Her skin? Her skin was black! It wasn't swarthy or tanned, simply black—as black as coal. The woman wore sneakers on her stockingless feet; she came closer and closer, staring at the stewardess with vivacious eyes then started to smile.

Aunt Polya muttered to herself and recoiled, shuffling her feet. Utterly bewildered, she watched the staircase which was getting crowded. Most of the women wore free-flowing robes or skirts that looked like wraps of gay fabric; exotic necklaces tinkled as they walked; flowers peeked out from behind their ears. The men's clothes were no less weird: one wholesome, tall fellow seemed to be wrapped in nothing but a sheet; his shoulders glistened as if they had been dipped in grease. Just a handful of the men and women were dressed like Russian people. The contrast between these dark-skinned, strangely-clad, strangely-talking people and those dear milkmaids gave Aunt Polya once again a pain under her shoulder blades. She stood there dumbstruck, unable to move a foot. She watched Ivan Nifontitch, his face red as if he had just come out of a steam bath, threading his way among the rapping, dancing strangers, trying not to look frustrated in his efforts to assign the guests to their rooms. The stewardess couldn't budge.

…

She still was in a stupor when the hallway had emptied, when the chambermaids began darting frantically from room to room, until a loud, clanking crash at her feet woke her up. The youthful maid Gapkina had broken a pitcher! Aunt Polya cast her subordinate an annihilating look and left her to collect the broken glass; she went to her office.

The corner room, the stewardess noticed, was still unoccupied. A cheerful room, she thought, remembering the previous occupants—Xenya and the camel-girl. Too bad! Aunt Polya turned around and took another look at the stairway; two more dark people were coming up.

They looked like teen-agers, so young and thin they were. Between them they carried a basket, the sort of hamper the inn laundry was brought up in. The white-robed man had a gay-colored piece of baggage under one arm and a bundle hung down from his shoulder. The woman wore a necklace that looked like a string of dried corn.

They reached the middle of the hallway and began looking around, a lost expression on their youthful faces. The man smiled sheepishly and showed Aunt Polya a key, the key to the corner room. The woman tilted her cropped head and smiled too. Aunt Polya stared at them and then … took a glimpse at the basket. What she saw made her gasp. …

In it was an infant, asleep. …

He lay amid pillows, as black as a little lump of coal, his little foot stuck out, baring a sole as dark-pink as a rose petal. His breathing was loud.

“Oh, Mother, Mother!” These were the only words Aunt Polya was able to utter. “Oh, Mother,” her eyes were glued at the basket. The woman had said something, one long word, but Aunt Polya didn’t understand. She took the key from the man and went to open the corner room. The couple followed.

The stewardess was anxious to get home this evening, to tell her daughter and son-in-law all she had seen today. She’d try to relate everything, from the very beginning; she’d talk slowly and watch them gasp and shoot up their arms before she’d go on with her story. She’d watch them shake their heads as she’d tell them about this couple who had dared to travel through half the world with an infant in a basket. What a day!

But nobody was home. … Only the cat sat on the table, nipping leaves off the bouquet in the flowerpot. “Scram, you viper,” Aunt Polya screamed. She felt hurt, ready to cry. After tossing around a few pillows and pulling off bed sheets, she went to sleep without supper.

Next morning she came to work quite early; the guests had been up already. Doors were slamming, black-skinned lodgers popped in and out of rooms like jacks out of boxes. They were darting by, their robes floating,

rushing downstairs for breakfast and then to the buses waiting for them outside. The door to the corner room was open.

Aunt Polya took a peek inside. Only the woman was in, standing at the window, the baby in her arms. The baby—his stark-naked body shining, white bands on his black, little arms—looked like a rubber toy. Aunt Polya watched. The mother pulled the baby to herself, stuck her face into his bare belly, then tossed him up into the air. She caught him, and mother and baby were both flooded with laughter. The woman seemed very young, just a girl, with coarse, kinky hair, swollen lips that looked funny the way they were thrust out. Aunt Polya stepped in. The woman stretched two thin, black fingers and made a "goat" for the boy, exactly the way Aunt Polya had made it for Gnatick when he was tiny.

"How come you went on such a long trip with the baby?" Aunt Polya asked, and not knowing why sat down. She, too, made a "goat" for the boy. He opened his little mouth and laughed.

"How come you did it, silly people?" Aunt Polya asked again. The mother didn't answer. Dying from laughter, she tossed the baby into the air again.

"One has to," the stewardess made an enigmatic statement. There was silence for a while. "And where do you live?" the stewardess asked again. The woman stared at her, apparently trying to make out the words. "Where did you come from?" Aunt Polya asked emphatically. "Where did you come from? Don't you understand? Lord Jesus, what poor slobs, not a word of Russian! All right, what is the name of the place you live? Huh? How shall I explain it?"

She cast a pleading glance around the room, as if asking the walls to help her. The woman still stared at her, pressing the baby a little closer.

Aunt Polya had an idea. She put two fingers on the table and made them walk just as she did it for Gnatick—to make believe a man was running. Next she puffed and puffed like a steam engine; then she waved her arms to convey the picture of an airplane. Finally, breathing hard from the effort, she gave up and sat down.

The woman had been watching attentively; suddenly a smile brightened her face. "Mozambique," she said in a soft, guttural voice. "Mo-zam-bique."

“Mo … zambique?” Aunt Polya repeated. The woman nodded. “Where’ll that be?”

Another few minutes but the conversation didn’t click. Aunt Polya picked up the empty basin from the table and left. She decided to stop in at the manager’s office. Ivan Nifontitch was an enlightened man; he had on the wall a large map of Europe and he’d tell her where Mozambique was. But he wasn’t in.

When Ivan Nifontitch entered his office he found the stewardess, her glasses on, moving a dark, firm fingernail along the Adriatic Sea. “What are you looking for?” Ivan Nifontitch was amazed. “What are you trying to find, Aunt Polya?”

“Where’s is tsat Mozambique?” the stewardess reverted to her Ukrainian dialect. “Vy isn’t it on tse map?”

“I wish I had your worries, Aunt Polya,” Ivan Nifontitch commented with a sigh. “Mozambique is in Africa. In Africa …” he repeated.

Aunt Polya left. The corner room was wide open but its occupants were gone—even the basket with the baby.

The whole day, while occupied with her routine work, the stewardess was unable to get rid of a vague feeling of apprehension. Every now and then she walked up to the window to see if the bus was returning, and finally she went downstairs to wait for it there. The little red-haired boy whom she had seen the day before stood at the entrance. His plaid shirt was pasted with stamps like a checker board with buttons. He, too, was apparently waiting impatiently for the bus to arrive.

But the bus wouldn’t come.

“The customs they have in Mozambique,” Aunt Polya complained to the linenmaid, Terekhina. “They take a tiny baby and walk around wiss him the whole day in Moscow. What for? It’s hot like hell in the city. …”

Once again she glanced through the window then decided to bring some hot water for tea. She left, knocking her heels against the floor, her face flushed with annoyance.

The corner room occupants returned toward evening, when the stewardess happened to be in her office. Aunt Polya walked through the hallway when she heard some long, queer sounds. The door was half-open, she was unable to keep from peeking in.

The woman sat at the basket; she was singing.

As a matter of fact singing was not exactly what she did; there were no words to the melody. Yet Aunt Polya knew that what she was hearing was a beautiful, sad song. The woman's song was the cry of the wind, the rustle of the leaves, and the chirp of the birds. Sounds integrated into each other gracefully like one breath of air into another. Aunt Polya stood there at the lintel, listening.

She stood there for a long time; her feet hurt, yet she was unable to tear herself away. Melancholy pictures of her own childhood came to her mind. There she lay again on an oxcart, listening to the songs of the drivers, seeing flashes of flames in the steppe; there she lay on the oxcart, seeing unfamiliar cottages in the distance and hearing voices of alien people calling her. It all became the present: there she stood at the lintel, listening to this guttural voice and seeing distant flames, woods and trampled paths, currents of alien rivers and faces of alien children. Aunt Polya saw an unfamiliar life unfolding in front of her eyes as if it all were transpiring behind that half-open door.

Was that Mozambique?

Aunt Polya stood there until the song had stopped, until she could hear nothing but the quiet breathing of sleeping people. Then she tip-toed away.

Next morning when the stewardess came up to the second floor, the lady occupant of the corner room had been standing in the hallway. She had on the same clothes she wore the day before, except that her head was tied around with a conelike band, and her neck adorned with a string of beads as big as plums. A multicolored bag dangled down her arm.

As soon as she saw the stewardess, the woman began to wave frantically and patter. She opened the door of her room and pointed her dark-greyish palms at the baby sleeping in the basket. Then she pattered again and pointed at the clock in the hallway. Her husband had been standing at the basket, uttering a few words every now and then, raising three fingers. Aunt Polya understood: they wanted her to look after the sleeping infant for the three hours they'd be away.

"A mother's lot ain't easy; without a helping hand one can't do it by herself," Aunt Polya said sententiously. "I'll look after him, no trouble." She gave the woman a reassuring pat on the shoulder and watched her pick up her swirling skirts and dash downstairs to the waiting bus. The red-haired boy with the stamps was at the landing.

“Did you lose anythin’?” Aunt Polya asked sternly.

“Khow do u do?” the youngster tried to be funny. But just in case the stewardess wouldn’t appreciate it, he stepped back. “Auntie,” he said, “I wanted a stamp from Black Africa.”

“Look what fancies these kids get into their heads. Can’t leave people in peace! Get lost, I say!”

The boy took off. Aunt Polya got busy with her cleaning. There was no trace of any of the lodgers—as if a gale had swept them away. In the corner room the baby was fast asleep, and a sun ray appeared to be climbing from the floor into the window.

Aunt Polya looked into the room several times. The baby’s sleep was as sound and deep as Africa itself. By the end of the third hour, as she was about to go downstairs, a loud, demanding cry made her stop.

No sooner did she bend over the basket than the baby became quiet. He lay on his back, uncovered; his pink-heeled feet spread apart. His big, round eyes watched her curiously.

“Mommie will back very soon,” Aunt Polya tried to assure him. “Wait a bitsy bit.”

However, the moment she moved out into the hallway a loud cry rang out in the room. Aunt Polya returned and felt the sheet in the basket. “Ah, ha,” she said. “No wonder.”

Her eyes searched for dry diapers—there were none. “Heck, who cares,” she said, seizing a dry towel from the rack and spreading it under the boy’s back. He calmed down. But again, the moment she made a step backward he let out a lungful. It was obvious; three hours were over, he was hungry.

“We are quite mouthy, aren’t we?” Aunt Polya asked, picking him up. His black, little hand took a firm grip on her collar. He smelled of milk and warmth as all babies do when they wake up. “Lookie, there’s a pussy,” she pointed out after carrying him to the window. “Lookie, there’s a doggie runnin’.”

She held him as a mother would hold a baby; her large palm under his dark, little behind. Suddenly, the infant’s thick lips parted and a flood of crying poured forth. “Our mommie’s gone,” she tried to comfort him. “Tst, tst—she went and gone.”

But the baby screamed and screamed. It didn’t help to take him to the other window, swirl a tube in front of his eyes, even try to unbend those

rheumatism-bound legs and dance with him. The baby wanted to eat, eat and nothing else!

Chambermaids peeked into the room several times; the floor waxer, Uncle Fyodor also stepped in with some advice. Aunt Polya found it ridiculous to listen to him; she had given birth to four of her own and knew only too well what it was when a baby's feeding time came. It was almost the end of the fourth hour and his parents hadn't come back—as if Moscow had swallowed them.

"You," she ordered the maid Gapkina who stood watching the screaming infant, her neck craned like a gosling's. "Run along and bring me some tea! An' make it sweeter. What are'ye gaping? Never seen a cryin' baby? Go on, on the window there's a little bag with apples I bought for Gnatick. Rub one on the strainer. Fa-ast!"

Gapkina dashed out. A few minutes later she came back flying, out of breath. Aunt Polya poured carefully a spoonful of sweet tea into the baby's open mouth. The child spit it out in disgust. She tried to give him some strained apple; he got quiet for a second, staring at her, before kicking angrily and beginning to scream even louder.

"Look at him, tsat Mozambique," Aunt Polya despaired. "Fwat are children eatin' tsere? No tea, no apple. …"

Maria Petrovna, the administrator on duty came into the room, attracted by the baby's crying. She watched in silence for a while as the stewardess walked back and forth, trying to calm the inconsolable infant. "Listen, Aunt Polya," Maria Petrovna suggested reflectively. "What if we asked Terekhina? What do you think?"

"Oh, my God," the stewardess exclaimed, hugging the gasping baby to her obese chest. "Why didn't I think of it?"

In the little room behind the vestibule the linen maid Terekhina sat on a chair, her fat calves set wide apart, feeding her infant daughter who was just brought to her from home. The well-knit little girl lay in her mother's arms like a doll, cozily sucking on the huge breast.

"Listen, Terekhina," the stewardess stammered. "You see, his mommie's gone, and it's his feeding time. The babe's simply cryin' his heart out. He's such a cute, little devil. So smart. …"

Terekhina seemed flabbergasted. She stared at the glistening, black infant in Aunt Polya's arms, her bright eyes open wide, wide droplets of

perspiration showing up on her stubbed nose.

"You've got enough for four," Aunt Polya suggested, looking askance at Terekhina's heavy breast. "That's nothing for you, huh, Terekhina?"

"So what, so what," Terekhina kept saying, not taking her fascinated eyes off the baby boy. Her daughter stirred but hadn't stopped sucking. Without looking down, Terekhina barely squeezed her breast with her fingers.

"Gimme him," she suddenly demanded, opening the last two buttons of her blouse. "So what, he's here, isn't he? I can't let the boy go hungry, can I? His mommie got tied up somewhere, it isn't every day she's in Moscow. …" Terekhina smoothed the other breast and took the baby from Aunt Polya.

The boy calmed down immediately. He clutched the breast with both of his little hands and began to suck rapidly … blissfully. …

"Look how he goes to town," Terekhina marveled. "Quite bright."

"He knows what he's doin'," Aunt Polya agreed.

"Where did he come from?" Terekhina asked, making the boy more comfortable.

"From Mozambique, of course, you silly," the stewardess explained. She dropped down onto the next chair and heaved a sigh of relief. "From Mozambique," she repeated. "You know where Mozambique is, Terekhina? It's in Africa. … Far away in Africa."

1961

The Bridge

by Nicolai Chukovski

Nicolai Korneyevitch Chukovski, 1905-1965 the son of the famous Russian writer Korney Chukovski, is known in the Soviet Union for his translation of Conan Doyle. His best novel, The Baltic Skies, *published in 1955, was translated into English.*

"I just can't see him going," Gramma said, turning over the potato cake in the pan with a knife. "He's scared of everything."

"He'll go," Aunt Nadya replied from the depth of the kitchen. "He has to go. He'll be better off there."

Gramma sighed loudly. She wasn't at all convinced Kostya would be better off there.

Kostya had heard every word. He stood not far from the open window amid the currant shrubs, quickly picking the berries and shoving them into his mouth. Since it had been decided he would have to go away, Kostya was spending hours at a time in these shrubs, their luxurious, end-of-July growth serving as an excellent hiding place. He liked to be alone, and not have to talk to anyone. Through the branches creeping over the window sill into the shade-filled kitchen, he could see Gramma's hands moving over the kerosene burner, and hear the sizzling of the frying pancakes.

"He's scared of everything … everything," Gramma repeated. "He's afraid to buy a stamp in the post office. How'll he go?"

Kostya's mouth was getting sour from the berries. He worked his way out of the shrubbery, found his bicycle on the dark porch, and he opened the kitchen door. Aunt Nadya was peeling potatoes—since it was Sunday she

hadn't gone to work in the factory but was helping Gramma. The peels coiled like spirals over Aunt Nadya's thick, manlike fingers. Gramma, a squat, little woman, had just turned over another sizzling pancake. She looked up at the boy. Kostya knew that the mountain of potato cakes piled up in a plate at the burner was being baked for him—one more sign that his going-away was final.

"I'm going for a little ride," he said glumly, hoisting the small bicycle over his shoulder.

Gramma sighed, stepping heavily from foot to foot. "Go on, have your last ride," Aunt Nadya told him without lifting her face from the potatoes. "You won't be doing it there."

Kostya walked the bicycle through the open wicket and threw his long leg over the frame. The bike, a juvenile size bought a long time ago, had become too small for him. This year he had shot up to almost twice his previous height, though otherwise he remained the same: narrow shoulders, a thin neck with a protruding Adam's apple, and slightly protuberant, translucent ears. Mechanically Kostya rode out into the alley, hedged by dusty elder thickets. His sharp knees almost touched his chin but he didn't mind—he was much too used to it. Mechanically he swerved to his left to cut into the open fields; he didn't want to meet anybody and didn't want anybody to disturb his thoughts.

Last spring after he was graduated from high school, barely getting promoted, Kostya had decided that going to the institute was out of the question. There had been a time his marks were no worse than anybody else's, but after his mother had died, a year-and-a-half ago, he hadn't attended school for several months, and he had fallen too far behind to catch up. Everybody in class had known that Kostya never learned his lessons. He had become shy and unsure of himself, and the shyness had compounded his confusion whenever he'd been called to the blackboard.

And then his awkwardness. In company he'd either keep quiet or blurt out anything that came to his mind, then feel ashamed of himself. He had begun to avoid people, go swimming by himself, had even given up the soccer team. Once he had been shortchanged in the bakery shop and instead of reminding the sales woman that she had made a mistake, he had told his grandmother that he had lost the money. Gramma was the only one with whom he felt at ease, unafraid. But now he'd have to leave her. …

This was the third year Gramma hadn't worked in the factory but had lived on her pension. Aunt Nadya had four little children; her husband had gone into construction work somewhere on the Volga; and there were rumors he had himself another woman—for the last year he hadn't sent home a kopeck. The whole settlement where Kostya had been born and lived all his starless seventeen years was made up of people working in the factory. It was a women's factory where a true man wouldn't be caught working. Lads would leave the settlement as soon as they were graduated, and Kostya, too, would have to leave and stop living at Gramma's and Aunt Nadya's expense. But where? Uncle Vassily Petrovitch, Gramma's brother, had asked him to come, promising Gramma to take good care of him and find him a job. Everybody had thought that this was good and right, that a bright future was ahead of him … everybody but Kostya. Deep inside he was afraid nothing would come out of it, yet he didn't dare tell anybody.

He didn't dare confess to anybody how frightening was the thought of leaving Gramma. Uncle Vassily Petrovitch loomed in Kostya's mind like a cold, strict old man of whom even Gramma was afraid. Quite often she had warned him "not to do anything to spite your uncle." Uncle Vasya had left for Siberia many years ago, before Kostya was even born, when his mother was still a little girl. He had been a tugboat captain on that great Siberian river that flows into the Arctic Ocean, but now he was more than that—he was a chief over a whole fleet of boats. Kostya often saw this river on a large map hanging in the classroom; with all its winding tributaries it reminded him of some strange plant with many weird roots stretching and stretching. … Uncle Vasya often asked that Kostya come. "I'll enter him in the River Technicum together with my son Kolya," he wrote. "They will drill them there so that in three years both of them will become fine navigators." When Gramma had read that letter she flinched and cast Kostya a frightened look at the word, "drill." And yet tonight they would go to the railroad station and wait for the Moscow train arriving at five in the morning. He would leave all by himself for Moscow, the unfamiliar, big city he had never seen before, and in Moscow he'd have to find his way to another railroad station, board another train leaving for Siberia, and he'd be all by himself with nothing to remind him of Gramma's comfort apart from the potato pancakes in the basket. …

It was a warm but sunless, overcast day. Kostya rode out of the settlement and turned onto the highway running amid wavy fields. To the right, about three kilometers away, stretched the river—wide at times, hiding at times behind soft hills. The cloud-covered sky seemed to be hanging low over the usually busy highway, now deserted because it was Sunday. A warm, hay-scented breeze caressed the boy's face, as though careful not to disturb his thinking.

Deep in his thoughts, Kostya pushed the pedals, unaware of a little bird that kept perching on a telegraph post ahead of him, swinging its long tail, and seeming to wait until he caught up with it, then flying up again, perching on another post, farther away, and waiting again. The boy did not notice it, nor the old, thick-leaved linden trees—the remnants of an old road on which this highway was constructed—shooting up here and there like petrified explosions. Kostya pedaled onward where the gray ribbon of the macadam ran into the sunless twilight, rising softly or sloping gently.

Each time Kostya reached a crest of the wavy road, he had an excellent view to the next crest. Each time he was on the top of a hill he could see a green depression through which the road made a straight cut, first running down then up toward the crest where it butted against the sky and disappeared.

Hurdling one of these crests, Kostya sighted in the distance a minute, colored dot moving in the same direction. It occurred to him he might have noticed it before but had paid it no attention. There might have been a two-kilometer span between them—he only had a glimpse of it, looming blue and yellow, before it reached the next crest and vanished.

Kostya began to pedal faster. He dashed downhill, bouncing over a little bridge that spanned the two banks of a gully, then climbed the uphill stretch, using the impetus gained from the down-drive. He hurdled the crest and saw again the yellow-blue dot—bigger now, just beginning to move up the next rise. The distance between them had been shortened considerably; he could see it was somebody on a bicycle. How odd, he thought, so gaily dressed, yellow on top, blue below. Quite intrigued, Kostya leaned forward, pumping harder and harder, trying for greater speed.

As soon as he came over the next crest he realized that the cyclist ahead of him was a girl wearing a blue skirt and yellow blouse, her fair hair falling down her back. She had been pedaling unhurriedly until she heard him coming from behind. As she turned her face to him, the glimpse Kostya

caught was brief: a round, babyish face. There were still about two hundred meters separating them, and when she turned away again, her plump, little calves in the white socks began to push harder—the girl didn't want to be outdistanced.

She spurted ahead. Kostya learned forward on the bars, pumping with all his might. Yet he was unable to cut the distance by much—she seemed to be quite good. On the next rise he appeared to gain a little but when they came down the slope and the bikes rolled on their own, he stayed back somewhat. Her bike's better than mine, he thought. Yet the excitement of the chase added will to his strength—on the next rise he gained considerably, and covered the next downhill stretch, long as it was, without giving in a meter. Now he could see her well: no more than thirteen or fourteen. At times the girl turned her head slightly, seeming to try to catch a glimpse of him from the corner of her eye. Then he saw her chubby cheek, and a moment later he'd see her trying desperately to keep him from catching up with her. But he was drawing inexorably closer.

The girl's hair fluttered in the wind, exposing the back of her neck. They sped out of the fields, plunging into a forest of aspen, spruce and birch trees that seemed to rise into a solid wall. As the distance between the bicycles stubbornly decreased, Kostya was overcome by a sense of triumph. The girl's glances were more frequent, every time she tried to have a look at him her bike made a little zig-zag, and he gained a few meters. He was sure now to catch up with her, probably on the next rise.

A recently-laid asphalt road turned off the highway into the forest, right at the start of the rise. Kostya knew where it led: toward the river where a new bridge was being built to connect the state farms on both sides. But what he did not suspect was that the pursued bicycle would turn off to that road.

The girl made the turn abruptly. It was so sudden that he almost flashed by. She might have thought he would follow the highway and stop pursuing her. But Kostya had become so intensely elated that all he could think of now was catching up with her. He, too, swerved from the highway and spurted after her.

The road was downhill all the way. Both bicycles were tearing down at their maximum speeds, the girl steadily about ten meters ahead of Kostya. But he didn't care anymore—the road only led to the bridge now under construction and she'd have no choice but to stop there.

The road approached the bridge at an angle; through the tree trunks at the right the mirror of the river flashed far below under its steep bank. Cement barrels, sifters, and wooden scaffolding loomed before their eyes together with piles upon piles of scrap concrete—the unfinished structure was right in front of them.

The bridgework had no top layer yet but it spanned both banks. It looked like a net scaled by a formless hodge-podge of wood in which the future metallic slickness could only be vaguely surmised. Now because it was Sunday, instead of the unceasing hum of work, a deep silence stood over the river.

Everything happened so fast that Kostya had no time to consider the danger. Suddenly he saw that the asphalt was coming to an end, and a four-plank trestle, laid over a sand embankment, led to the bridge. The girl pedaled ahead at top speed. Kostya was so shocked that before he had time to recover his wits he found himself, too, bouncing along those planks. He gripped the bar firmly to avoid veering off onto the sand. But the sand wasn't what bothered him. What frightened him was the realization that the trestle ran from the embankment onto the truss, across the unfenced iron girders which served as a narrow path for the bridge workers—high above the water. Was she insane? She was coming to the end of the embankment without slowing down!

"Brake! Brake!" he managed to shout out. But then he choked on his own words.

The girl half-turned at the sound of his voice. Again she glanced at him from the corner of one eye. Her bicycle, making a slight zig-zag almost pulled her off the planks. But she managed to straighten out the wheel and spurt straight ahead, onto the truss, over the narrow path suspended high above the water.

Something is terribly wrong here, flashed through Kostya's mind. He should have braked short of the bridge but for some uncanny reason he hadn't done so. His bike carried him onto the truss, onto those same planks, high above the water. …

There was no more time to stop, turn or look back. The only way was straight ahead—with no let-up of speed. His hand must not jerk. He knew he couldn't stand the suspense; he'd weaken from fear. But he must go on … because of her … because her bike was straight ahead. …

Kostya couldn't tear his eyes away from the girl. She rode evenly, unswervingly, yet he sensed a desperate tension in that straightness. How can she stand it! Oh, if she only doesn't get it into her head to look back! How far is it to the end of the bridge? If she can only keep her hand from jerking! If only she'll not try to look back! She's over more than half—one more minute, and it'll be all over. Just that she doesn't look back!

The girl did look back.

She turned her head just slightly, just to make sure from the corner of her eye that he was behind. As she turned, her front wheel gave a slight jerk. A second, a long eternity, she struggled with it, trying to make it straight. But she couldn't. Her bike veered into the air, into emptiness. …

He didn't see her fall. She simply disappeared from the bridge—she and her bike. Abruptly he did something he had thought was impossible—he put on the brakes and jumped off onto the planks. He looked down. The water was way, way down, glistening with a dull, firm shine like a metal—streaming away, somewhere beyond the bridge. He saw her bike, caught by its frame at the end of a beam, sticking out from behind the rough scaffolding, still swinging slightly. But the girl was nowhere in sight.

Stunned, Kostya put down his bike and dived.

He pierced the surface of the water with his hands and felt it close above him as he was dragged down by the current. Although stung by the fall, he had the presence of mind to open his eyes and look for her. All he could see were hazy outlines of some huge blocks and posts. After touching the bottom, he felt himself pulled up. He turned over under the water and surfaced.

The current pulled him to the bridge span. He came close to a concrete abutment not cleared yet of some wooden casing and piles of lumber. Above, fragments of the cloudy sky seemed to be peeking through the many-storied net of girders, crossbeams and timbering. The current was strong, too strong for any resistance. Kostya drifted with it, turning, whirling, not even trying to fight it until … he saw her, just around the bend.

The top of her head appeared behind a pile of timber sticking out of the water at the bridge span. Up to her mouth in water, the girl clutched the pile with both hands, right in front of foaming whirl. Kostya couldn't see her whole face but her cheek and one eye, and from the look of that eye—large,

frightened—he knew that she was holding with her last strength. One more moment and the current would carry her away.

"Hold on!" he shouted, choking on a mouthful of water. Now there was only one thing to be afraid of, that the current would carry him by her. He'd never be able to get back to her against it. Kostya tried desperately to gain control of his movements. His wet breeches and canvas slippers hampered his effort. Nonetheless, he managed to throw out his left arm and grab that same pile. As the current whirled him around and around he hung on, his shoulder touching hers.

The girl's pale, wet face was close to his, her wide-open eyes bright with tension. He hoped she would believe that he would be able to save her. But how? He didn't have the slightest idea himself what to do next.

High up, the concrete abutment towered like a tremendous giant. Its surface was too smooth to offer a hold. Kostya looked back—behind them the river grew wide.

"You know how to swim?" he asked.

She shook her head.

Kostya knew that the girl couldn't hold on much longer. He looked back again; the left bank was not too far away. By himself he'd probably make it. To the right, in the direction of the current, the river made a bend. To the left, oblong stones jutted out of the water. There, he should try to get over there. …

He looked at the girl again. He'd have to act fast, as long as she still had some strength left. "Let go," he ordered.

"No, no."

"You must listen to me," he said gravely. He pulled her hand away from the pile and tried to put it on his shoulder. Immediately her other hand slipped off the pile and now the girl clung to him with both hands. Under the burden Kostya let go, and both of them began to sink. The whirl pulled them under. In desperation he forcibly pried open her hands and pushed her away. Thrashing wildly, the girl rose to the surface by herself. He, too, came up, snorted and looked around. The girl kept thrashing right beside him. Her round face rose for a moment out of the water, her mouth gasped for air before she began to sink again. The bridge with all its mass of iron and wood seemed to be rapidly backing away.

Kostya wound her short, chubby arm around his neck. Her other arm which was about to clutch him he pushed aside. “Don’t you dare,” he said sternly. “You must obey me.”

She obeyed and stopped clinging to him. As they began to float more steadily, Kostya struggled stubbornly, stroking with one arm and cutting across the current toward the stones. The girl’s soft arm rested confidently though heavily against his neck, pressing his face into the water. But Kostya knew how to handle himself. As long as her face remained above water, he’d be able to lift his head for a breath of air, then let it be submerged.

The girl stopped struggling. She calmed down and obviously had more confidence in him than he had in himself. “I’ll do whatever you say,” she whispered into his ear. But he felt he was weakening and he was afraid the current would not let them reach the stones. He tried to drift to the shore but the whirls carried him to the right, around the stones, toward the rapids. Two times he tried to reach bottom with his feet; on the third try he touched it.

Although the water reached above his ears, he managed to keep afloat. The shallow from which the stones protruded had apparently extended quite far. Seeing him stand, the girl tried to stand up too. After she swallowed some water and choked, Kostya picked her up and, stepping carefully, he carried her to the shore.

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting on the sloping bank amid elm trees, watching the water through the branches. Their clothes were hung on the trees to dry—he had only his trunks on, she had on panties and a white undershirt. Her semi-nakedness embarrassed him, he tried not to sit too close to her, nor glance at her too often. She, however, seemed not to mind. Her innocent, bright eyes were full of confidence as they admired him through strands of wet hair that kept falling onto her face.

Their bicycles lay side by side on the grass. Kostya had removed them from the bridge by himself. The zeal of achievement had made him feel light and fearless. It hadn’t been too difficult to get his bicycle, although when he had stepped onto those planks once again he had asked himself how he was able to ride on that narrow, unfenced path. An hour ago he’d probably not have had the courage to walk on it; but now he ambled without fear, without having to look at his feet. To recover the girl’s bike wasn’t that easy; he had to clamber down the timbering and hoist the thing with his feet while hanging on the girder with his hands. He had enjoyed his

work, however, knowing that she stood there on the shore, watching him, admiring him. He hadn't been afraid to fall into the water because that would have only been a repeat jump. But he had been concerned he might drop the bicycle. He hadn't. He rolled them both up onto the shore, toward the elm tree where their clothes were hung to dry.

"You can do everything," the girl looked at Kostya with admiring eyes.

"I can," he confirmed. "Had I dropped your bike I'd have given you mine." He felt like being extremely generous; as a matter of fact he was sorry he couldn't give her his bike.

"I'd not have taken it for anything," she said. "You are leaving?"

"Yes, tonight."

"For long?"

"Forever."

"And when will you come back?" she asked.

"Probably never."

The impression his words made on her affected him too.

"Never," the girl repeated slowly. "How far are you going?"

"Very far," he replied. "I'm taking the Moscow train tonight."

She asked if he was going to the district capital. She had apparently thought the district capital was very far.

"Uh uh," Kostya said. "The day after tomorrow I'll be in Moscow."

"In Moscow?" she asked respectfully.

"But only for a day," he explained. "Got to do some sightseeing."

"You're going even farther?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded. "To Siberia."

She became quiet. He sensed how impressive that name sounded to her.

"Who's going with you?" she asked again.

"I'm going by myself."

While he answered her questions, Kostya began to see his trip in a new light. He had suddenly made a discovery—he found out something about himself he had never known: he could accomplish tasks. The future, which up to now had appeared fearful, suddenly became a grandiose adventure within reach.

"I'll guide big ships," Kostya said, getting up from excitement. "Diesel motor ships."

“Where to?”

“To the Arctic Ocean. Beyond the Arctic Circle and back. Through the taiga, tundra, all kinds of animals,” Kostya recalled what he knew about Siberia. He was waiting for her to ask if he really knew how to guide Diesel motor ships, but she didn’t. Perhaps she had some doubts if he really could do everything. He, too, had some doubts.

“I’ll learn,” he said, thinking of Uncle Vasya. “What one man can do another man can too.”

There was silence for a while. Narrow-shouldered, long-legged, upright, Kostya stared into the water glistening through the trees. Absorbed in his new ideas, he seemed to have forgotten about the girl who sat with her arms around her round knees, glancing at him timidly from time to time.

“Is somebody coming to see you off?” she asked softly.

“They are,” he nodded.

“Who?”

Kostya knew that Gramma and Aunt Nadya would come with him to the station, but somehow he didn’t feel like telling it to the girl. He made no reply.

“I’ll come too, may I?” she asked in a pattering whisper, brushing off her wet hair from her forehead. “We live next to the station, I’ll just jump out of the window and run up. May I?” The girl talked fast, as if she were afraid he might stop her. “I won’t be in anybody’s way, they won’t even see me. I’ll just watch. May I, may I?”

Kostya didn’t answer. He looked at her with a joyous wonderment in his heart—it was a hitherto unknown tenderness which he realized was also a new discovery.

1963

My First Feature Story

by Marina Romanina

Marina Romanina, born around 1940, studied music at the Tashkent Music Institute. She has published sketches, feature stories about youth and art. She is a graduate of the Gorki Institute in Moscow.

"My God, am I seeing green?"

This was how we were met by the literary associate editor of the district newspaper, Sashka Godh. As it turned out later he wasn't a bad fellow, this Sashka, but in our hurt pride as aspiring journalists, Oleg and I had begun to bear him a deep grudge. And who would welcome a greeting like that? Here we come with honest-to-goodness papers certifying in boldface letters that we are no greenhorns by any means but sophomores at Moscow University down for our first journalistic practice, and what does he do? Gives it to us in no uncertain words. No, we didn't care for that kind of reception!

We had decided to give that Sashka the cold shoulder, but he, in his passion for allegories, was too blind to see the daggers of hatred in our eyes. Tactless Sashka never stopped giving us advice.

Our boss, the editor, turned out to be a grave-looking man with a profile taken straight out of a coin-collection museum, and whose facial characteristics, as we were able to establish a few weeks later, were the typical features of an Eastern Slav. His name: Nikita Rogachev.

Nikita Rogachev was apparently well aware of the peculiarities of his face because otherwise it would be hard to explain the way his old high-backed leather chair was placed, letting us see only one rosy ear, a determined hunch of a nose, and then a quizzically raised mouth corner.

Oleg and I, however, not intent on analyzing the mysteries of his physiognomy, would be sitting there looking over some notes on an exhibition opening or on the unveiling of a new meat-grinder model, occasionally daring to lift fluttering eyelids at the disdainfully proud hunch. We'd feel that cactuses in the desert behaved more gregariously than the people in our office, and yet we'd freeze them from the realization of our own dearth of ideas, quiet down in our corner, making hectic efforts to give the semblance of extreme activity. Nobody paid any attention to us, however, and when some novice stepped up to us with a question, Sashka would immediately raise his head and ask in his disgusting twang, "May I help you, Comrade?"

Thus two weeks went by. Gradually we got so used to feeling right at home behind our desks that Oleg went as far as allowing himself a smoke and drawing caricatures of many-handed, many-faced Sashka-monsters, while I was trying to write poetry on editorial paper. My poems, a little on the sad side, told of pride, of friendship, and Moscow.

That evening, as we were returning to our hotel, we felt very good, and for the first time we considered ourselves true journalists. Oleg nonchalantly threw his coat over his shoulder, bought us Eskimo pies at the street corner booth, and uttered in a drawling voice, "This Nikita of ours runs off quite some editorials! Have you seen his last?"

I looked at him in surprise, then the sympathetic blue-eyed gaze of the youthful salesgirl told me of the degree of Oleg's bravado. "No," I said, "but I think it is good to be a journalist."

A few days later, Oleg was busy with his caricature production, and I was transcribing a poem, when Nikita unexpectedly showed up at our desks. We had been so used to seeing nothing but the chief's profile that we didn't recognize him at first, and when we did, in our embarrassment we forgot to put away the results of our private efforts. With unhurried portentousness the chief's large, sure hand with an ink spot on its index finger picked up first the caricature, then my poetry. Right here and now I felt that Oleg and I were being torn asunder. No more "us" from now on. It would be he and I, each for himself.

"Hm," Nikita's voice rang from some dizzying height. "Have a look at this, Sashka."

My heart rolled down with incredible speed. Sashka, though, seemed not to take any offense. On the contrary, he gleefully dashed out into the

corridor, brandishing the sheet of paper in his hand, and we heard his almost childish laughter dying away in the distance. I was waiting my turn.

But Nikita reascended his throne. Bowing his head sidewise, he scribbled something on a sheet of paper. After a while he asked in a low voice, “Kids, what would you like to write?”

Oleg’s reply was instantaneous: “A feature story.”

I was quiet, because what I would have liked to write was poetry.

“A feature story about what?” Nikita asked.

“About a man,” Oleg replied laconically, in a pompous voice.

“How about a theatre?” Nikita countered in an unperturbed quasiwhisper.

As it turned out immediately, Oleg was interested in the theatre. “In that case,” Nikita suggested, “why don’t you try to write a story about the work of a young set of actors? I have in mind a recently established theatre … ,” and he went into the details of Oleg’s assignment. “Is it clear?” he asked in conclusion.

“Clear.”

“Then on your way.”

“Right now?”

“Sure right now, no sense dawdling. Come on, come on, let’s have some action.” Having said it, Nikita began gazing at the window which, judged by his imperial profile, signified the end of the audience.

Oleg gathered up some papers, leered at Nikita, then nodded at me and disappeared with a fluttering of lips. Thereupon the silence drew on. Just at the moment I decided the chief wasn’t going to speak to me, he asked, “How long have you been writing poetry?”

I had never been able to talk about my poems, something within me would shrink as if unexpectedly touched by an ice-cold hand. I wouldn’t even let anybody read them right away but only after a few days when I could look at them from the distance. It had always seemed to me as if the poems tarnished and lost their warmth by being talked about. Of course, I knew kids who felt just the opposite. We had, for example, a fellow in our group, Petka Goryev, who’d flaunt his sheet of paper before he’d managed to put down two stanzas. “Hey, kids, listen to this,” he’d shout, running around and showing it to everybody. “Quite good, isn’t it?” he’d shout after reading it to the first listener, slapping him excitedly on his shoulder, and

dashing off to the next. So then, when Nikita asked me about my poetry, I only nodded in reply. I was afraid he'd start right away taking it apart. But Nikita told me in a rather pensive voice, "You know, they might be printed."

I looked at him, not recognizing his face. As he smiled again and his eyes seemed affectionate, attentive, for some reason I immediately forgot his profile as if I had always seen him only like this. However, as I maintained my silence, Nikita added, "What about a feature story, you ever write one?"

"I never did," I said.

"In that case you should try," Nikita smiled. "It might come in handy some day since you've chosen this kind of work."

That Sunday I'd barely had my breakfast when I sped off in a creaking bus toward a little workmen's town to interview one Nicolai Ivanovitch Pospelov, a master workman in a machine-building plant. I was to familiarize myself with the way of life of a leading workman and write a warm feature story about him.

While we had been traveling on the town's cobblestone road, everything went fine, but no sooner had we turned into a country road than something happened to the bus. It began to snort, cough, as if it were choking, then belched out a thick stream of black, smelly smoke and suddenly took off, staggering from side to side, scaring the wits out of dogs and occasional pedestrians.

The passengers convulsively clutched their seat supports and shook as if in seizures of ague. I clenched my teeth, lumps of fear clogging my throat, but then the bus unexpectedly stopped dead on the run, as if it had suddenly spent its last strength. We tumbled one on top of the other, and when we'd regained our senses we found we had arrived.

I reeled out into the soft roadside dust. Cottages floated by me in a slow procession, flashing their blue or green front yards, trees swirled in front of my eyes, a frightened cackle of chickens struck my ears.

I remembered that Nicolai Ivanovitch's house was supposed to be at the other end of the road, in the direction we had come from. While on my way to it, the houses stopped floating, the chickens stopped cackling. I was composed enough to read the name of the street.

There was his house, amid orchard greenery, and through the open gate in the fence I could see a barn and a covered well with a double-pitched roof. At the barn I saw the back of a young fellow in a blue T-shirt squatting in front of a motorcycle, while a woman with a white kerchief, dressed in a long loose jacket, was wringing out a rag. I thought she must have just finished scrubbing the floor.

"Hello there," I said, trying to give the impression of a seasoned reporter. "Is Nicolai Ivanovitch home?"

The woman stopped wringing her rag. She tilted her head and fixed on me a pair of gray eyes set in gay folds. "Kolya," she called, slightly raising her voice, "someone here to see you."

The fellow in the blue T-shirt stopped fiddling with his motorcycle and reluctantly turned around. Wiping his hands on a piece of cloth, he walked up to us. "Came to see me?" he asked, studying me with equally gray eyes that stood out on his sun-made hazel face.

"I'm here to see Nicolai Ivanovitch Pospelov, the master-workman," I said, unwilling to admit the possibility that the renowned master and this suntanned boy with the tuft of straw-blond hair and house shoes on his bare feet were one and the same person. Probably his son, I thought.

But the fellow cut my conjectures short. "I'm Nicolai Ivanovitch Pospelov," he said. "You from the Discom?" Apparently abashed by my fixed look, he suddenly turned shy. "I probably have a dirty nose," he wiped his cheek with a greasy hand, blushing terribly. "Go on in, I'll be with you," he called, running off.

A short time later we were sitting in a low-ceilinged room that felt cool from the freshly-scrubbed floor. Lace-trimmed curtains and the leaves of a tiny canned lemon plant fluttered in the breeze. With an air of importance I laid the recently received reporter's notebook on the table and took a glimpse at the question guide given to me by Nikita. My host, his face washed, his wet tuft of hair neatly combed, sat modestly on a tabouret like a model pupil, with drawn knees. His answers were monosyllabic, of the yes-and-no variety—he was graduated from a technical high school, was assigned to a plant, was in the army. …

I began to feel bored. The loud buzzing of a fly made me remember Oleg and his assignment on a boat ride. Some people have all the luck, I thought. My questionnaire was exhausted. Our talk was a failure and I had no story. I

was annoyed at myself for not having found a way to reach this fellow. You're inept, I told myself, and you tackled something you can't handle. I was ashamed to think of what Nikita was going to tell me tomorrow. I could already visualize Sashka's skeptical look and Oleg's glances of sympathy. What a shame!

"By the way," I asked, "have you ever thought of er … some competitive improvements?"

"Me?" Nicolai blushed. "Yes, I have," he said before clamming up again.

The woman with the white kerchief, his mother, peeked into the room. "Why not turn on the lights?" she suggested.

Only now I noticed that it was getting dark outside. I was ready to leave when a titilating aroma of baked potatoes hit my nostrils.

"Would you mind having supper with us?" the woman asked uncertainly. Nicolai Ivanovitch's younger brother (also Sashka) was already sitting at the table. It was I now who was answering questions. Elizaveta Ivanovna, the boys' mother, was amazingly skillful in drawing out of me that I was a practicing reporter (a mother is always concerned), and a sophomore at the university.

"You're quite a girl," she sighed. "My Nicolai is also getting ready to enter the university. I don't know what to tell him. … Well," she asked, "have you managed to write down a lot?"

"Not much," I replied dejectedly. "Nicolai Ivanovitch isn't too eager to talk about himself."

Sashka snorted into his plate. He found it funny that somebody was referring to his brother by his first full name and his father's name. Elizaveta Ivanovna frowned visibly at her younger son. Then she turned to Nicolai. "What's the matter with you?" she scolded. "Somebody comes from quite some distance to talk to you, and you. … Why don't you tell her about that kind of cutter you were the first to think of, spent whole nights on it. I'd get up," she was talking to me again, "we used to have a cow then, I'd get up in the morning to milk the cow and I'd see a light coming through from under his door. What's the matter with him, I thought, hadn't gone to sleep? I look in, there he is, his head on the notebook, fast asleep. Then they gave him an award, and he used it to buy his motorcycle. All the time he's been trying to talk me into going for a ride with him. But it's not

for me. … I can hardly stand on my feet," Elizaveta Ivanovna added, not without some coquetry.

"Now see here, Nicolai Ivanovitch," I said (and Sashka snorted again), "how come you didn't tell me all that?"

"Why this respectful 'Nicolai Ivanovitch'?" his mother prompted. "He's no senior citizen. Call him Kolya, that's good enough."

After supper they spent quite some time showing me the family album, and when I finally decided to leave, it was quite dark. Lights were on in all the neighboring houses. Sounds of an accordion wafted in through the cool blue of the evening. "Would you like me to give you a ride on my motorcycle?" Nicolai offered timidly.

"Well …" I remembered the bus ride and thought the motorcycle couldn't be worse than that. "Let's go."

He led the motorcycle out onto the road. A few dark figures detached themselves from the next gateway. "Going to town, Kolya?" a brittle voice inquired.

Without replying Nicolai turned on the motor.

"Oh, he has a gal with him. …"

Nicolai intensely pressed on the gas pedal. The brittle voice intoned:

> "Went a belle to the well for a hike
> For a hike on a bike, on a mo. …"

"Shut up, you," Nicolai cut him off curtly.

The jingle stopped. I sat on the back seat and we dashed off. House lights began to flash by like sparks; through my squinting eyes I could see them tiny and full of glitter.

We stopped at the hotel. Two motionless red glow-worms twinkled under one of the windows. As I got down the glowworms simultaneously flew apart and the voice of Oleg rang out poignantly, "She has appeared!" The other glow-worm made no comment.

"Come here, Oleg," I called into the darkness.

Both of them joined us.

"I'd like you to get acquainted," I said. "This is Kolya Pospelov."

"Uh huh," Oleg said in a tone of voice which conveyed a firm conviction of the fact that this was Kolya Pospelov.

“Alexander,” the other man said, reaching out his hand. It was Sashka Godh, but somehow I wasn’t surprised.

They invited Nicolai to sit down but he thanked them. “Have to get up early,” he excused himself. He promised to come back within a week. His motorcycle roared again and vanished into the darkness.

“Well,” Sashka asked, “is he your hero?”

“Can’t you see he’s her hero?” Oleg observed.

“So what,” I snapped back. “He’s at least a man. He *will* be awarded The Hero, it’s only a matter of time.”

“You’re chasing after stars,” Oleg insisted.

“We were all ready to report you missing,” Sashka quipped. “ ‘A handsome reward is promised for the return of a foundling.’ Since twelve o’clock we’ve been discussing nothing else but where you may be hiding.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Were you two on the same assignment?”

“We met at the pier,” Oleg explained. “But let’s have some fun now.”

“No, kids, count me out,” I said, completely forgetting that I wasn’t at the university but that right beside me stood this pompous, hateful literary associate Godh. “I’m terribly sleepy,” I added, as I ran off to my room, waving them goodbye.

I was only putting it on. For a while I simply couldn’t bring myself to start working on my story. My roommate was fast asleep so I first switched on the table lamp and pulled it up to my corner, then undressed quickly and accomodated myself as cozily as possible with the papers and notebook on my lap. The writing went smooth and easy, fancy phrases kept coming by themselves. Things turned out to be easier than I had thought.

When morning broke I was in my bed, red-eyed, with only a couple hours of sleep behind me. But I had something to show for it: twenty-four pages of quick handwriting, almost no erasure, lying neatly under the pillow.

I got to work late but it didn’t bother me. With me I had an exonerating document, the proof of penmanship. No doubt, laurels were in store for me.

I stepped in like a triumphant tribune, barely feeling the floor under my feet. As I entered, all three of them raised their heads from their desks. Slowly I walked up to Nikita’s desk, slowly I opened the folder and pulled out my stack of papers. “Here,” I said, modestly laying it at the edge.

Nikita seemed overwhelmed by the volume. He glanced at me like a baited rabbit and asked in a low, low voice, “What’s this?”

My reply was terse but dignified, “My feature story.”

“Uh *huh,”* Sashka exclaimed.

“Oh, I see,” Nikita cheered up. “I’d thought for a moment more poetry.”

I went to my desk. Nikita had pulled up my manuscript and begun to read, his head leaning on his hand.

Time dragged on.

“You know,” the chief spoke up at last. “I’m afraid I have to give it to you straight: no good. Come here. … Now have a look for yourself. In the first place, on almost every page you have ‘glimmer of steely eyes,’ or ‘his eyes flashed like steel,’ and this ‘straw-blond vortex’ has obviously taken the better part of your judgment. Here, ‘the cutter bites in, sputtering. …’ Come on, where have you seen this kind of writing? But all right, forget this, but where is the pivotal point? You see what I mean? You simply haven’t thought things through and haven’t digested the material. And then something else—twenty-four pages of story, and half of it your own concoctions. … no, it won’t do.”

Nikita had his say while I sat on the dunce stool, unable to lift my eyes.

“Listen, Nikita,” Sashka interposed. “There must be something we could do with it.”

Hopefully I looked up. Nikita peered straight at me but this time his full face had the old profile expression—no difference anymore. “As of now,” he said coolly, “there isn’t a thing we could do with it. Let’s think it over and then try to tackle the problem.” He got up and hastily left the room.

I cautiously picked up my sorry effort from his desk and trudged back to my place. For the rest of the day everybody was careful not to pay me any attention. Sashka was trying to be funny, watching me from the distance on the sly. But this made me even worse. After work I went to bed early and had no trouble falling asleep.

Next morning, same as usual, I worked on the incoming correspondence. A few days passed, and on one of those heavy-hearted mornings the door opened, and unexpectedly the familiar straw-blond tuft of Kolya Pospelov peeked in.

I jumped up as if scalded by hot water. Before he realized what I was doing, we were both outside in the corridor. No doubt he had detected a

strange expression on my face because he asked me feelingly, “Well, how have things been with you?”

This was all I could stand. Stammering with shame and self-abasement, I told him about the “epithets” and the “pivotal point,” and above all, of my own ineptness. We walked back and forth in front of our building, and each time we passed the ice cream stand, Kolya felt embarrassed by the salesgirls’ looks and stopped to buy eskimos. He’d remove the silver foil very diligently and treat me in silence, finding no words for comfort. Finally he got an idea: “Would you care for a ride in the breeze?”

I consented. We went back to the office to pick up my purse and handkerchief. Kolya exchanged greetings with Sashka and Oleg, and as I cleared the table of all the papers Nikita walked in. In his hand he carried a galley proof still raw from the ink, and I noticed that he and Sashka traded knowing glances. Nikita laid the proof on my desk. “Well, why don’t you read it?” he asked me in a chilly voice.

I was about to tell him that I was leaving when one glance at the proof made me change my mind. It seemed as if I’d just arrived. On the upper right corner of the proof was a poem. My poem.

1965

The Backstage Cry

by Yelena Uspenskaya

Yelena Uspenskaya, born around 1920. During World War Two she worked as a traveling feature editor for Komsomolskaya Pravda. She has published a collection of short stories, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow *which deals with the life and work of young textile and construction workers.*

The railroad clerk shoved out Anya's ticket and slammed down the window shutter.

Forty-five minutes to wait for the train! The waiting room had a pungent odor of smoke even though nobody was smoking. She looked around: it seemed almost empty and yet there were quite a few people in it. Too big for this town, Anya thought. And not only the waiting room, everything in this town was too big—everything, the station, the theatre (never a sell-out), even the stores of the main square.

The stores! Always selling white pumps that gather dust like the dickens but when you try to buy a pair of simple rubber boots—none to be had. And without rubber boots you just can't get anywhere when the theatre goes on a tour of the province, Anya found that out quite some time ago.

"Our town, Anna Vladimirovna, is still small, true," said Anton Petrovitch, the director, when he had invited her to come. "Small, but not for long. Our theatre, though, is large. …"

Whether it was because she was addressed by her first and father's names for the first time in her life, or because this little lilac-covered town

reminded her of her native place, or perhaps because Anton Petrovitch was so nice—Anya had immediately accepted the job.

Then things turned out not as they had seemed. There were no quiet little streets here, no luxurious front gardens, no little samovar smokes in the evenings—none of the things Anya associated with her childhood. In brief, this town had no outskirts at all. It was being built from the middle—from the main square which had the theatre and the stores. Everything was big, yellow, columned. The streets ran off the square in squares. The houses, one looking exactly like the other, were all four-storied bricks which nobody got around to painting yet. Neither did the trees planted all along the streets get around to growing—they remained the same size as their stake props. One street, the one which led to the railroad station, was really in bad shape: the linden plants died, but the props shot up, grew, and turned out to be little poplars. The poplars, though, were so tiny and dusty that Anya often felt like giving them a bath.

And she used to have dreams! She'd rent a room in a little house and each morning before leaving for rehearsal she'd fool around with her flowers in the front garden. … And after the show her landlady, a nice old person, would treat her with tea from a noisy little samovar. Everybody in town would get to know her and when she passed on the street schoolgirls would give her friendly smiles and whisper behind her back. …

When Anya was a little girl her mother took her once into a store. Mother smiled warmly at a young, dreamy-eyed woman. Later Mother explained that that had been a famous actress who played Nina in the *Seagulls*. "You'll go to see her too, when you're a little bigger," Mother had said. But Anya never did. The war had started. All the performers and that beautiful actress had left. Then during one of the air raids the theatre burned down and a bomb fell into the dugout where Anya and her mother were taking shelter.

Anya woke up in a hospital train car. From the kind way the medsister treated her she understood that her mother was no longer alive. She had tried to scream, cry, but couldn't. Her mouth had felt hot and big, terribly painful to move. She found out only a few days later that her lip had been cleft by a splinter.

"She got off easy," the doctor had said, caressing her head. He was big, white, and hung over her bed like a vault.

In the orphanage Anya sulked, kept hiding her face and hiding from people.

It was a year later, when the dramatic circle was to produce *Cinderella,* that she unexpectedly got the main part. She disbelieved at first. They're having a joke on me, she had decided and became offended. But Nina Vassilyevna, the director, had convinced her that nobody would even notice the scar under her make-up and that she should have no trouble with her part. In fact, Anya's performance was said to have been a success: there was long applause, they sent her flowers. After the show, as they were walking through the dark, sticky raspberry alley which seemed to have more cobweb than autumn-swept leaves, Vitya, who had played the prince, kissed her on her cool cheek and they both swore to remain friends forever. Vitya had turned fourteen already, and a few days later he said goodbye to everybody in the orphanage and left for Magnitka. He had sent her two postcards on the journey and that was all. Obviously Vitya had plunged headlong into work and forgot all about her. In time she, too, stopped thinking of him. She never suspected, though, that Nina Vassilyevna had arranged the whole Cinderella plot for her benefit. But from that time, Anya had begun to feel unashamed of her face and gained confidence in herself. Those had been hard times—the kids had to plant potatoes, get wood for fuel, do repairs around the house. Each day would bring more kids into the orphanage, and they'd be crying at night and Nina Vassilyevna would have no mind for any more shows.

They had staged *Cinderella* three more times: in the Home, at school, and in the *kolkhoz.* Then the costumes were made over into New Year's masquerade dresses and the circle fell apart. For a year-and-a-half they had no performance. Then times began to improve and life became easier. That was when Anya had decided to become an actress. Because of that she had to wage fierce struggles to get passing grades in physics and mathematics since one wasn't accepted into the Theatrical Institute without a high school diploma.

At the exam first she had to read a fable; after that she read Tatyana's letter from Pushkin's Eugene Onegin. She was terribly frightened but tried to look for comfort to the famous old actress who was nodding encouragingly. But then the actress smiled condescendingly—Anya hadn't reminded her of Tatyana. "Now let's see," the old lady said in a deep, beautiful voice which Anya had heard so often over the radio. How dear it

sounded now. “Honey,” the old lady said, “why don’t you try a scene like this: you’re home, sewing, and suddenly you hear the doorbell. Your dear friend whom you haven’t seen for a long, long time enters.”

Anya frowned. She found nothing to say. The actress was silent too for a while, then resumed, “Come on, honey. Don’t be nervous. Collect yourself.”

Anya envisioned herself in the dining room of the orphanage. There she was sitting at the window, sewing, and there … Vitya comes in. He’s tall, big, grown-up. … She jumped up, threw away her kerchief that was supposed to be the make-believe handiwork and dashed across the room toward the door, her arms outstretched. Her eyes had been damp from tears.

“A smart girl,” the actress had beamed.

But Anya could never get used to Moscow. She had always felt like a visitor there, a visitor who came for just long enough to go through all the museums and see most of the shows in the theatres. And during all those years that she had studied in Moscow she had been losing her way in the rushing crowds—as if she were a newcomer. Only late in the evening, after the insitute was over and they all went to Red Square, Anya would stand for a long time and admire the outlines of the Kremlin, of the Historical Museum, unable to tear her eyes away, trying hard to engrave all the impressions on her mind. She knew then that there was a Moscow which became dear to her heart, the quiet, transparent night Moscow.

Why was she going to Moscow now? She couldn’t say. Nothing pleasant was in store for her there. Nothing at all! It was even frightening to think of what was going to happen to her after they found out she had run away from the theatre. Of course, she’d tell them she was ready to go where they wanted her to—even Chukotka or Sakhalin. Because after yesterday’s flop she couldn’t show her face here anymore. Besides, who said she was even an actress? So what, why not become an instructor in a children’s home and organize there a world-shocking dramatic circle!

Here she was a total failure; everything went wrong. Not even a nice old woman to rent a room from. Anya had been simply assigned a little room in a large four-room apartment in a new house, together with the store manager and his wife, Matilda Yegorovna, who often bitterly complained that she and her husband got no more than two rooms. Matilda Yegorovna had no place for her furniture which she had brought from Kursk, so she put some of it into Anya’s room. On the one hand Anya found this arrangement

quite accomodating—she had no money to buy her own furniture; on the other hand, this was a cause of some inconveniences. Matilda Yegorovna had put a couch into Anya's room. The couch was wide but quite old. The springs were sticking out, and sleeping on it was worse than sleeping on a harrow with its peg teeth up. She had made an offer to Matilda Yegorovna to have the couch reupholstered at her own expense. "No," Matilda Yegorovna said. "This is a Gobelin antique, and I won't let you have it covered with the kind of stuff you get in this town." That antique, though, had another thing wrong with it—it was full of bugs. And those were Kursk bugs which Matilda Yegorovna had brought with her into this new town. And they were mad, too, probably because they were lonely here, and it was impossible to get rid of them completely—they seemed to have no fear of boiling water, kerosene, or DDT. Anya's braids and dresses smelled all over from DDT, but those bugs were still very much alive. Apart from the couch, Matilda Yegorovna kept in Anya's room a huge redwood secretary full of drawers that were always locked—they contained all kinds of household souvenirs. Whenever Anya had visitors Matilda Yegorovna came in without knocking to remind her not to put cups with hot tea on the secretary. But Anya kept her cups on the windowsill because there was no room in her "apartment" for a table. There was a corner into which she might have been able to squeeze in a little table but Matilda Yegorovna had taken care of that, too—with a large potted fig plant.

Whenever Anya came into the kitchen Matilda Yegorovna would step in front of her husband and try to hide him from her view. "What do you need here?" she'd invariably ask. "You've got nothing cooking."

In fact Anya never did have anything cooking. It baffled her to realize that as a rule nothing was left of her paycheck toward the end of the second week. Who knows how she'd have managed had it not been for Fedya's handouts. Fedya, the electrician and richest man in the theatre, occupied the second room in their apartment. A man of his profession had always plenty to do in a new town. Even Matilda Yegorovna treated him with indulgence. Of course, he did all the wiring for her free of charge (as a good neighbor) and never refused to fix her stove or iron. Into Fedya's room Matilda Yegorovna had put more livable furniture: an armchair, a round table and two chairs. True, she had asked him to cover the table with plywood and a woolen blanket, but it was undeniably more comfortable to eat at a table than at a windowsill.

After they returned from the theatre, Fedya would invite Anya into his room and treat her with tea, biscuits and kelbasa, while he'd read Hamlet's soliloquies to her. Fedya dreamed of becoming an actor and she was conscientiously trying to help him. Whether because she believed he had some talent or simply because he was a kind fellow, Anya had no doubt that his dream would some day come true. Every day she had wanted to talk about him to Anton Petrovitch and each day it became more difficult.

When Anton Petrovitch had invited her to come and work for this theatre, Anya had been under the erroneous impression that she would be receiving all the main parts. Nothing of the kind happened. True, she wasn't left out of any play but the parts she had! A little boy, an old crone, a cleaning woman, or … barking like a dog. The group was small and sometimes she played two, three roles an evening. Anton Petrovitch was after her constantly—picking, drilling her like a sergeant, and when she once declared that playing old women was not her type of food, he smiled. "My friend," he said good-naturedly, "you don't realize yourself yet what type of animal you are."

Anya had become highly emotional when it was announced that the theatre was going to stage *Romeo and Juliet.* It had been namely the role of Juliet in which she had shown most promise at the final examination from the institute. And then, Anton Petrovitch gave the part of Juliet to Alisa Alexandrovna, a fortyish woman whose made-up eyelashes never stopped fluttering. True, if you didn't look at her, and just listened, her voice was much more pleasant—Anya couldn't help agreeing with that. Alisa Alexandrovna's voice was deep and flexible and gave Shakespeare's amazing poetry a uniquely full-bodied richness.

On the eve of the premiere, as Anton Petrovitch saw Anya backstage, all in tears, he first smiled. Next he said pointedly, "Your time hasn't arrived, old lady. You'll only be mouthing all that beautiful poetry and nobody will hear you farther than the fifteenth row. Your time hasn't arrived …"

Then he was gone. Barely thirty, she thought, and speaking with the voice of authority. Who did he think he was anyway, a nationally known actor? It would have been preposterous to talk to him about Fedya after that.

But last night she came to the conclusion that Anton Petrovitch had been absolutely right. She was simply no good! They had included her in the cast of *A Lucrative Spot,* and the part was good too—Yulenka's. No doubt she

would have preferred to play Polenka, but that was beside the point now. It had been a guest performance in a mining town. The truck had been terribly rickety, the squeaking chairs in the auditorium had made her extremely nervous, in short, she couldn't remember her part. And how she'd botched it! With a bang! And all the conning and cramming she'd done before! Inspiration, what malarkey! She could have sworn that just as she had stepped onto the stage the chairs began to squeak unbearably loudly, the kids began slurping their ice cream cones more noisily than before, and the fellow in the second row stopped watching the show and began to neck with the girl sitting next to him.

After the show she crawled into the rear of the truck and, facing the cab, she turned her back to everybody. Oh yes, they were all sorry for her and were reluctant to tell her how abominably she acted. She cried until midnight. Even Fedya's friendly comfort hadn't helped. Especially since he hadn't seen the play—he had been working that evening in the hospital. Besides, how could Fedya have felt any sympathy for her when he was so happy about himself? While she was on tour the theatre in town had staged *The Scuttled Escadrille,* and since there had been a shortage of men, Fedya got the part of a sailor. So while trying to comfort her he was unable to get rid of his silly smirk and in the end had made her so mad that she asked him to leave. Perhaps, had there been a rehearsal next morning it might not have occurred to her to run away. But Fedya, drunk with happiness, had run off to the theatre and she had remained alone with the locked secretary, her banged-up part and the Kursk bedbugs. That was when she saw things in the right perspective: get away from here, you'll never make it as an actress, Anton Petrovitch has no more faith in you, the town is unfriendly, and nobody will even miss you. Who needs a ham anyway?

Time was dragging on. There were still twenty minutes left to the train's departure. Anya plodded into the square, hot and dusty. The little lindens were pitifully shriveled and bleached. No, she wouldn't wait until they grew up and this town filled with so many people that the theatre would always be a sellout. Let Anton Petrovitch say as much as he wanted that she had a kitten's sense of perspective …

On the billboard there was a placard announcing today's show. Two schoolgirls stopped in front of it. From behind their neatly combed heads Anya scanned the poster. Her ears blushed! There it was, "The backstage cry—A. Shukina."

The backstage cry! Was that as good as Juliet?

Suddenly Anya remembered her voice, the backstage cry. The opening of the second act. “Mommie, Mommie,” rings a desperate child’s cry. On the stage a mother darts about in frantic helplessness. The war has started.

“Much obliged, girlie,” Alisa Alexandrovna had told her after the rehearsal. “Your crying was great. Helped us a lot.”

As she had been crouching backstage in the dusty shadows, crying, “Mommie,” Anya remembered her despair of years past. “Mommie!” She had left that word in childhood, unuttered, lurking somewhere deep within her. The scar on her face had healed, it was hardly visible anymore, but the aching sorrow—it was as strong as ever.

Here was a bench. Anya sat down and put the suitcase beside her. So today’s backstage cry won’t be A. Shukina’s. Whose will it be? Nobody knew she was leaving. What if they forgot to call on her and waited until the last minute? What cry will it be, a cry with no experience or no cry at all? And then Alisa Alexandrovna will be waiting for the cry, alone on the stage, facing a huge, dark auditorium. In fifty minutes from now! What’s going on, Alisa Alexandrovna will wonder. The audience will begin to snicker, make noise, get out of control. The young people in this town aren’t used to theatregoing yet. They haven’t had time for that yet.

Anya had a mind to walk toward the theatre. No, no she can’t do that. Everybody there knows of last night’s flop, they’ll laugh at her or even worse—pity her. But Anton Petrovitch, he always goes home for dinner before the show, she’ll go and tell him everything …

She knew where he lived—in a house like all the others with one exception: two tall fir trees grew beside it. They remained from the time this place was a forest. They gave the house a cozy, lived-in look. Whenever she passed this house she felt a little envious. Anton Petrovitch, he’d always show up in the theatre so fresh and clean-shaven, smelling of eau-de-cologne, with an immaculate clean shirt—as if dressed for a festive ocasion. He probably had a doting mother to fuss about him and give him his samovar-made tea after the show, and she probably made sure that flowers were on the table and she probably dusted his favorite books and his chest of drawers that was never locked. His wife, true, was still traveling around. He had said the other day, “There’s people who just don’t click character-wise, but my wife and I we haven’t clicked occupation-wise.” His wife was

a geologist and she had to go where there were no towns! Anton Petrovitch's place was where a town had grown up and had a theatre in it.

Still, Anya thought, his wife comes to see him from time to time and keeps writing to him. It's easy for him to berate young, defenseless girls who are all alone in the world.

A little boy opened the front door for her. "You came to see Anton Petrovitch?" he asked. "There's his room."

She knocked. No reply. She knocked again and softly opened the door. The room was clean and empty. Never before had Anya seen such an empty room. Rooms might be temporarily empty during repairs when furniture had been removed, but the emptiness of this room was an actual, permanent emptiness. An accurately made cot, a tiny table, and a stool, in the corner a pair of pants on a hanger—that was all! That was the room of a man who had no time to think of himself, of a man who for twenty-four hours a day was absorbed by very important things he loved to do. Only the walls in this room were alive. An attractive feminine face leaned over the bed. There was the *Romeo and Juliet* placard. Besides it leaflet upon leaflet fastened with pins to the wallpaper—thoughts that are brought to life when a man rambles at night, thinking and working. The walls had been converted into a desk. Notes like: "Don't forget the opening of the third act." Or, "Catherina, the main thing is force and purity of action, no hysteria." Or, "Try Fedya the electrician." Those paper slips were alive, astir, irate. "Fourth act—miserably done. Do it over." These were thoughts one musn't forget. An incessant creativity. The last thoughts before sleep and the first thoughts after consciousness returns.

So that's how he lives. Without a samovar, without a mother, without a wife!

On an electric plate in the corner stood a tea kettle—so tiny it could hold just a cup-and-a-half, at the most two. It must have seen plenty, that tea kettle—banged around, a wire instead of a handle. But it wasn't pitiable by any means. On the contrary; it seemed to snub its chipped nose, as if asking: "Why're ya starin' at me? Can't ya see, we go, boil, an' heat?"

Once again Anya glanced around the garrulous walls. There was the placard she'd seen outside a while ago. Next to those offensive words, "The backstage cry—A. Shukina," was a plus sign and an exclamation mark. A plus sign indeed! Here's a man thinking of it, praising it, inserting it into the

placard while that “plus” has gathered its few rags and is about to run away. Anya nodded cheerfully to the tea kettle and went out.

So. And there she was thinking everything would remain the same here. Anton Petrovitch would go on shouting in his sleep and fixing on notes with new thoughts, her associates would go on having rickety truck rides on dirt roads to bring relaxation, amusement and smiles to miners, and Alisa Alexandrovna would go on changing in cold club dressing rooms and ask anxiously the moment she returned from the stage, “Well, how was it tonight?”

Fedya? He’d go on reading Hamlet soliloquies to somebody else and act his first part, and they’d finish building this house and that, as well as the one for which they’re digging the foundation now. More and more people would come to live in this town and fewer and fewer empty seats would be in the theatre with each show … And the lindens would bloom … And here she thought she could do without all of that …

A fine drizzle was coming down as Anya started on her dash to the theatre. The little lindens looked clean, their large leaves rustled boldly, stirring in the rain like round green baby chicks. Through the open windows she heard applause, voices, noises. The end of the first act. She was in time!

“Your cry tonight was disgusting,” Anton Petrovitch told her after the show. “Disgusting,” he mumbled to himself. Because he was at a loss to understand why this girl had such a happy gleam in her eyes.

1963

What's in a Glass?

by V. Kaverin

Venyamin Alexandrovitch Kaverin, born in 1902 in a musician's family at Pskov. Wrote poetry before graduating from the Institute of Oriental Languages in 1923. His first story, The Eleventh Axiom, *was published in 1920, and was well received by Gorki. His novel* Two Captains, *translated into English, was awarded the 1946 State premium. During the Second World War Kaverin served as war correspondent for Izvestya. Several times he was elected member of the Presidium of Soviet Writers.*

Petya Uglov, the long-legged, young scientist who knew more about complex physiology than anybody else in this world (apart from one African and two Australians), crawled up carefully onto the upper berth without even poking his fellow traveler, and fell asleep shortly after the train pulled out of Perm. As a rule Petya did not dream, but this time he saw people through a milk-white glass pitcher. Why are they coming at me, Petya asked himself, and why are they so happy? Then he knew—behind them was Leningrad.

A happy sigh escaped Petya's sleep. He had never been to Leningrad before though he had read up all there was about it—and not only in Russian. If there was a Lenfilm movie in town he had to see it (those Lenfilm movies were usually shot on location). Not too often did Petya have money to spare, yet he could not resist buying from time to time those gravures showing finely drawn greyish or dove-colored buildings along the Neva River. Oh, how he loved Leningrad!

Then Lady Luck had smiled at him: along came this assignment—a trip to his beloved city. I'll spend no more than half a day on it, Petya had thought, and the other two-and-a-half days I'll devote to sightseeing: The Hermitage, the Senate Square, the Islands, then Pushkin's Statue. … Of course, Valka, his best friend and old school buddy would have to take him to Akimov's Theatre and the Spartak Ballet, and Tamara, his wife, might join them too …

Leningrad, as it turned out, unfolded rather disappointingly. The only view Petya was able to get from his hotel window was a narrow barnyard and a few roof tops. True, there was something of that Leningrad charm in those dingy barn walls that made up the yard well, Petya decided, but after enjoying the view for a while he made up his mind to call the Glass Institute for an appointment.

2

Petya Uglov sat in the office of the institute's research director, his head pulled into his shoulders, and listened attentively. This tenth-generation Frenchie, he said to himself, with his bow necktie and fancy handkerchief in his breast pocket, looks like a nineteenth-century actor but he knows what he's talking about. The director, Igor Lavrentyevitch Croizé was quick to pick up every thought of Petya, develop it nimbly, then turn it into another direction. They had been discussing the recently deceased acadamician Tshassov, the inventor of that "certain type of glass," which Uglov considered a "must" for finishing the apparatus he had constructed. Tshassov had written a magazine article about that glass, but having been unable to arouse any interest in his invention, he had called it quits. As far as Uglov was concerned the old man had played a mean trick on him by dying at ninety, a few months too soon.

"Young man," Croizé said, patting his bald, handsome head crowned by a whisk of grey hair, "I like your project." The director's suggestions on how to use the Tshassov glass were of dubious value, but Petya was pleased by the interest this influential man, unquestionably an expert in his own field, had shown in him. Later, however, when they began talking about technical matters, Petya found that things were far from rosy. Tshassov's glass existed—but in theory only. Apart from a little sample in the possession of Yevlakhov, there was none.

“Who is Yevlakhov?” Petya asked.

Ivan Pavlovitch Yevlakhov, the director explained, was an associate of this institute, a scientist who used to be the inventor’s close friend. “If need be, of course, we can issue an order to manufacture the glass,” Croizé said, “but there’re several considerations why we shouldn’t do it without Ivan Pavlovitch’s say-so. Of course, I can pick up the phone and buzz him, but it’s better, Comrade Uglov, if you see him in person. Besides,” the director went on, “he may have some valuable information for you … By the way, you’ve never heard of Yevlakhov before?”

“No.”

“Tst, tst. In that case you’re ignorant of the fact that the history of the Russian glass stretches from Lomonossov to Yevlakhov?” There was a shade of irony in Croizé’s voice.

“I’m afraid I am,” Petya said.

“You see, that’s your specialization age,” Croizé said, flapping his arms in mock despair. From a tube on the table he pulled out a sheet of paper and drew a line in the middle of it. On the left side he printed YEVLAKHOV, on the right UGLOV.

“It’s good to have a plan of discussion,” Croizé advised. “ ‘What can I do for you?’ he’ll ask you. Don’t worry if he sounds brusque. You just tell him what I told you but try to be brief. Then he’ll say ‘Good, but where do I come in here?’ Then you say, ‘I can’t see how this work can be done without your participation, or at least consent.’ He’ll mutter something, like ‘Fiddlesticks,’ but you don’t give up. ‘I still can’t see …’ you repeat and start rolling out the big guns … And don’t try to soft-pedal …”

Petya was listening, his long arms firmly anchored between his knees. He always loved clarity, yet this apparently clear-cut plan was somehow fuzzy. Why had Croizé taken such an interest in him? All right, as far as he was concerned the glass was important, but why should the institute care? Then why was Croizé sending him off to Yevlakhov instead of having the glass made right away. No, Petya decided, there’s something elusive here which has nothing to do either with him personally or with his apparatus. Should he mention his suspicions to Yevlakhov? Still, Croizé was a likeable fellow—smart, maybe even brilliant. …

The whole morning Petya had tried in vain to reach Valka. No answer. At last a stern feminine voice asked, “Who? The Koloskovs? No, they’re not home. He’s out of town and she’s at work.”

“Out of town?” Petya asked in a deflated voice. “When’s he coming back, you know?”

“No, I don’t,” she hung up.

Hell, that’s why he didn’t meet me at the station, Petya fretted. A good friend *he* is, Valya Koloskov! Wrote it was O.K. then left without a word. Well, perhaps he couldn’t help it.

However, while waiting in Yevlakhov’s reception room, Petya couldn’t get Valka out of his mind. Maybe he’ll come back, he thought. I’ll call Tamara in the evening.

It took quite some time before Yevlakhov asked Petya in. Ivan Pavlovitch was a moon-faced man of silghtly above average height with a few unruly strings of hair on the top of his head. “What can I do for you?” he asked (as Croizé had predicted) in an expressionless hoarse voice, patting his hair. The sarcastic look on his plump face made Petya uneasy. Yet, while forgetting the prepared plan of discussion the young scientist felt his thoughts flowing with spontaneity.

He had begun to talk. Yevlakhov listened at first in silence, a gleam of irony playing in his grey eyes; then he began to shoot out sudden questions. What does he think, this is an exam, Petya peeved? When he in turn asked a question, Ivan Pavlovitch didn’t reply immediately.

“There’s Tshassov’s glass,” he said at last, pointing carelessly at a tiny stand between two windows.

“May I see it?” Petya asked.

“Help yourself.”

Tshassov’s glass looked no different from any other glass—a matte little circle on a velvet background. “Now you see for yourself,” Yevlakhov said, “I just can’t see where I come in here.”

There was no doubt in Petya’s mind that the right thing to do would be to tell this man that he was *sent* here—sent by Croizé. But he couldn’t say it; instead, blushing up to his ears, Petya uttered the “planned” phrase.

“I just can’t see how this work can be done without your participation or at least consent.”

“What kind of pussyfooting is this?” Yevlakhov frowned, giving more hiss to the word than was needed.

Petya made no reply. In spite of the obviousness of the situation he felt that he should be groping his way through. He considered mentioning Croizé’s sarcastic remark about the Lomonossov to Yevlakhov stretch, but he changed his mind. A corollary thought had suddenly broken through. “Igor Lavrentyevitch’s of the opinion that without your consent …” Petya started.

“Igor Lavrentyevitch is wrong,” Yevlakhov snapped, smoothing the top of his head. “Consent by him alone is plenty. The blueprint is published, what else is there to it?” It seemed now there were two Yevlakhovs: one who a moment ago had been condescendingly uttering a few indifferent remarks, the other who was now making a deliberate effort to participate. Hell, it occurred to Petya, these two are at each other’s throats! Somehow he ought to find his way out of here but how? Psychology was never an Uglov forte …

“Igor Lavrentyevitch presumes that the glass can’t be manufactured without my say-so,” Yevlakhov shrugged his shoulders. “Very nifty but it simply *ain’t* so. So … will you excuse me please …”

The discussion was apparently over, yet Petya didn’t rise. As always in such situations he sulked, slowly trying to think. He was reluctant to leave Yevlakhov without having some measure of success. Ivan Pavlovitch, however, seemed to be getting impatient, sensing perhaps an oncoming struggle with this young man who kept staring at him. “You’ll have to excuse me, please,” he said, “it’s been my pleasure …”

4

The Spartak Ballet was out of the question. When Petya returned to the hotel he was told that there had been a call for him from Perm. My boss is an impatient man, Petya thought, he likes things done without delay. But that soon?

Since Perm could not be reached before midnight, he decided to drop in on Tamara. It was a better-than-an-hour boring bus ride in the Viborg section and as he passed street after street of drab brick houses, Petya speculated that this must be the most *untypical* part of Leningrad.

Tamara was home. Valya had gone to Moscow, she said. For how long? Who knows. Why? She didn't know that either, though she guessed it must have been on account of that new rocket. Didn't he know Valya was now connected with it?

"Since when?" Petya asked.

"Oh," she paused, as if she had to make sure that what she was going to say was absolutely necessary, "for some time."

Petya was all ears. Everything Valya had ever said or done was right, wise and most interesting. So he must have had his reasons for marrying this lanky, pale-faced creature with her strawlike short-cut hair that made her look like a little girl. At about ten he returned to the hotel and just in time. The boss called again. Petya reported how things stood; first, the boss screamed at him, then asked him to buy three oscillographs. "Yes, Professor Nikitin," Petya said, "I'll try to get them." He knew, however, that none were to be had—he had investigated already. No sooner had he hung up than Croizé's office called. It was his secretary. "Igor Lavrentyevitch would like to know," she said, "how you made out with Yevlakhov." She was sorry Ivan Pavlovitch was uncooperative. She wanted to have details. "He said there was no emergency," Petya lied.

She paused, then said something to somebody over the cupped mouthpiece. "Are you there, Comrade Uglov?" she asked. "Igor Lavrentyevitch would like you to drop in tomorrow at half past eleven. So long."

A strange call, Petya mused. Once again there was that vagueness—only one conclusion could be drawn: Croizé needed him as much as he needed Croizé!

5

This time the conversation was a tug and pull from the start. Petya wanted Croizé to issue the manufacturing order and the director was finding excuses why he should refer him to Yevlakhov or at least have his consent.

"Why don't you give him a ring?" Petya asked bluntly, tired of alibis.

"Indeed, why don't I?" Croizé said, picking up the receiver. The director's hand seemed to tremble a little.

"No answer, probably not in yet," Croizé said gaily a moment later, hanging up. "Just as I thought. I'll tell you. I'm going to send you now to

Oganezov—I'll tell you why. In the first place you ought to get acquainted with him anyway—glass is made by hand and he's our hands. In the second place, how shall I say it, he's Ivan Pavlovitch's alter ego." The director picked up the phone again. "Aram Ilyitch," he said a while later, "Uglov from Perm is sitting in my office now … a physiologist. … He came here on a business matter which could and should be settled right away. I've a request to you. … Show him around the institute, please …" There was a pause. "Why today? Please, the man came all the way from Perm … I'd appreciate it greatly, Aram Ilyitch … Very good …" Croizé smiled as he hung up. "Aram Ilyitch will only be too glad," he told Petya.

"Then may I tell him that he has your consent, Igor Lavrentyevitch?" Petya asked.

"Please do," Croizé said, pulling out a sheet of paper from his drawer.

Not another plan, Petya lamented in his mind. There was nothing wrong in seeing the institute, but this director was too fast today, too eloquent. Something about him was too elusive … He seemed cooler than yesterday, as if yesterday had been his opportunity and today was just another day, in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word.

Croizé had in fact made another sketch, but not of a discussion—it was the plan of the ninth floor where, as he said, it was not only difficult but almost impossible to find Oganezov without it.

"So you'll issue the manufacturing order today?" Petya asked.

Croizé's laughter had a ring of irritation in its gaiety. "It will be done," he said. His parting handshake was as firm as the day before; his "So long" was accompanied by that same warm smile. Petya knew better, however: this was the Croizé trademark. Without words the director had let him know that there was no sense in further meetings. As if he had said, "Look here, I've done everything I could for you. I'm sorry but I've no more time nor attention for you."

Petya took the elevator to the ninth floor. Like most young people, without knowing it he had yet to discover himself. Having found the obstacles more formidable than they had appeared on the surface, he didn't know how to overcome them. Yet he was convinced that he would not leave Leningrad without the glass. As he began looking for Oganezov he had already searched in his mind for a way out. His thoughts in physiology always ran deep, but his love for instruments as wise tools of science was as

great. Institute glasses were tools too, he reasoned, so he was in his own element. …

Apparently Oganezov sensed Petya's interest because no sooner had he met him than his erstwhile frown returned into eager congeniality. Small, thin, eagle-nosed, Oganezov talked fast, not realizing that Uglov could not absorb the rain of details yet was too bashful to ask questions, as if afraid that those pointed elbows of his, jutting out from his tucked-up cowboy shirt might goad him. A little pepper mill, Petya mentally nicknamed Oganezov, thinking of his hunched walk and grizzly, pepper-colored hair. But he's more salt than pepper, a mind like quicksilver, grasping instinctively a thread of thought before a sentence was finished. This man, Petya decided, was obviously the soul of the institute and he might appreciate frankness. "The Tshassov glass," Petya said, "this is the only reason I came here."

"No problem, we'll make it," Oganezov assured. "Have you been to Croizé?"

"Uhm … I was," Petya replied. "I'm not sure but it seems he said 'yes.' You see … Igor Lavrentyevitch asked me to see Yevlakhov, I saw him and Ivan Pavlovitch declined. True, Igor Lavrentyevitch said that Ivan Pavlovitch's consent was not important …"

"I don't get it," Organezov interrupted, blushing slightly. "Why isn't it important?"

"I mean practically …"

"What do you mean practically?" Oganezov asked in such a loud voice that a secretary that had passed them looked back startled. "Listen, young man, anything Ivan Pavlovitch Yevlakhov does is important."

"I beg your pardon," Petya said, unable to contain his annoyance. "I'm an outsider here, and to be frank with you, I can't make out what's going on between all of you. But it seems to me that whatever it is it shouldn't affect the point in question. If you're of the opinion that Yevlakhov's consent is indispensable and Comrade Croizé is … or isn't … why don't you have a talk with him about it?"

Perhaps, had Petya used a humbler tone of voice he might have won over Oganezov. But somehow the impression he conveyed to that little "pepper mill" was lack of respect for a scientist. Oganezov flared up, his voice trembled and every phrase opened with a "What do you mean?"

“I’m sorry that you misunderstood me,” Petya said with restrained anger. “Maybe the best thing for me here is to go over to Igor Lavrentyevitch and find out what he intends to do about the manufacturing order. Thank you for showing me the institute. So long.”

Croizé, however, would not receive him. He was about to confer with a Czech delegation, Petya was told by his usually polite secretary who had now a fancy hairdo and spoke curtly. Then as the buzzer on her desk sounded, she jumped up and dashed to the inner office. Through the wide open door Petya could see handsome Igor Lavrentyevitch, all in smiles, his white whisk of hair agleam, ready to go into orbit, so to speak …

6

Petya took off to look for oscillographs, and although he knew beforehand that he wouldn’t find any, he still felt disappointed. While eating dinner—which was his supper too—he planned his conversation with the boss, Professor Nikitin. He didn’t think it would be wise to try explaining all the mess over the phone. “I’ll just tell him that everything is in tip-top shape,” Petya thought. Eventually things would turn out all right.

Tickets for neither the Spartak Ballet nor the Comedy Theatre were to be had, so he took the third best: a dramatic play in the Bolshoi which somebody said was supposed to be good. However, when he called Tamara she told him that what was supposed to be good was another play, and this one wasn’t good at all.

“Any news from Valka?” Petya asked.

“No.”

“At least he might’ve called, the ox.”

“Yes,” Tamara said without enthusiasm.

He decided to rest a while and then take a little walk to see the Nevski Boulevard in the dark. He woke up around two in the morning. Annoyed at himself, Petya sat at the window and gazed at the patched barn roofs. As it often happened, he had thought while sleeping. He got out his drawing book and made a sketch. A moment later he crumpled it and threw it in the waste basket. When he fell asleep he didn’t wake up until late in the morning.

Still in his night shirt, Petya pulled out the sketch from the waste basket, smoothed it on his knobby knees and added a few lines which had occurred

to him while he was asleep. He felt as reluctant to go to the institute as an angler who has to wade into cold water to disentangle a fishing hook. But there was nothing else to do. Half an hour later he was again in the elevator to the ninth floor.

"Hello," Petya said, finding Oganezov. "I'll take only a minute. I just wanted to tell you …"

Oganezov seemed not to remember right away what they were talking about the day before. Then, after he did, he apologized for having been rude. "Funny!" he said, opening his mouth wide, like a baby. "You're a funny fellow. What is your name?"

"Uglov. But the point you didn't understand yesterday …"

"Phenomenal," Oganezov said, bending his long, wrinkled ear. He stared at Petya in silence for a while. "No, it won't work," he uttered abruptly.

"What won't work?" Petya asked. They talked more. "Have you seen Croizé?" Oganezov shot a sudden question.

"No, not today."

"Don't go then," Oganezov advised. "I'll tell you what, we'll get hold of Skatchkov."

"Who's he?"

"Didn't I introduce you to him yesterday?"

"No."

"I didn't?" Oganezov said incredulously. "Well, Skatchkov's a fellow who has a feel of glass—it's music to him. Follow me."

Skatchkov, however, the man with the musical feel of glass, showed no such finesse toward Petya. "They'll ask me, I'll do it," he sighed. "Besides, Igor Lavrentyevitch already spoke to me."

"He did?" Both Petya and Oganezov shouted at the same time.

"Yes … How much do you need?" Skatchkov asked without the slightest emotion.

"How much?" Petya repeated. "One kilo'll be enough."

"You must be joking," Skatchkov laughed. "How would you go about buying one kilo?"

"What does that mean?"

"Accounting won't issue an order for that quantity," Skatchkov shook his head.

“Not enough?” Petya asked.

“That’s right,” Skatchkov replied. “Aram Ilyitch,” he turned to Oganezov, “didn’t you explain this to Comrade …”

“What do you mean won’t issue an order?” Oganezov interrupted. “The formula’s here—one kilo today, twenty tomorrow. An order’s an order, what’s there to it?”

“There’s no order yet … to be exact,” Skatchkov said, scratching his head. “What can I do?” Then, as if struck by sympathy toward Uglov, he eagerly suggested, “Listen, Comrade, why don’t you have a talk with Yevlakhov? Maybe Ivan Pavlovitch won’t mind making a kilo for you in his laboratory; it’s worth a try.”

7

When things didn’t go his way Petya usually sulked. He was glum when he knocked at Yevlakhov’s office door that afternoon. There was no answer. He entered: the office was empty, a white coat was carelessly thrown over a chair. All right, Petya decided, I’ll wait. After a moment he walked up to the stand. The matte little circle lay untouched under a glass lid. One of the threads which tied it to the velvet background was torn. Petya lifted the lid, gingerly picked up the glass and took it to the window. A glass like any other—dull-colored, with a slightly nacreous shade. How strange, Petya mused, this plain-looking surface has such extraordinary properties!

The door creaked. Startled, Petya slipped the glass into his pocket and turned around. It had been one of those quick, mechanical motions which he had acquired in his adolescence when trying to hide a burning cigarette butt from his strict father.

“Oh, it’s you,” Yevlakhov said, lifting his face from a letter he had been reading on his way in. “What can I do for you? Would you care to sit down?” Ivan Pavlovitch had made no effort to hide his frown.

He doesn’t know I took the glass, flashed through Petya’s mind. He stood in a stupor, gaping at Yevlakhov. If there was a second of decision to return the glass it had passed. Now it seemed to burn him in his pocket, and when he walked up to the table, instead of sitting down, Petya kept standing, clutching the chair with both hands.

Yevlakhov remained standing too, hoping perhaps that his visitor would leave soon if he wasn’t invited again to sit down. Every now and then Ivan

Pavlovitch stole a glance at the letter which he had tossed onto the desk but said nothing. Finally the silence got the better part of him. “If I’m not mistaken,” he said, “I’ve already explained to you that I’ve got nothing to do with your problem. Unless, of course … something new?”

Petya shook his head. Such moments of bewilderment had been part of him only in his childhood …

“In the name of sweet heaven,” Yevlakhov lamented, “why are you here then? If you have something to tell me, come out with it; if not, please leave. What the hell!” Ivan Pavlovitch stormed, as Petya continued staring at him. “Oganezov told me a thing or two about you and I didn’t like what he had to say. Then Skatchkov. All those round-about, side-about ways … In the name of Allah, I pray, why should I busy myself with your problems, huh?”

Yevlakhov had wiped his forehead several times. Strings of hair looked awfully funny the way they bristled on the top of his head. He suddenly seemed remorseful for scolding his young visitor, then annoyed at himself for feeling remorseful. “Do you know what I’d do if I were in your place?” he said, getting crimson on his face and glowering at Petya. “Instead of begging every Ivan in this place for that glass I’d simply steal it and that would be the end of it. … And nobody would be the wiser …”

Perhaps, had Petya not happened to have followed Yevlakhov’s advice, he’d have known what to say. But as it was, the only thing he could think of was to take out the glass from his pocket and stare at it forlornly.

“What have you got there?” Yevlakhov asked angrily, obviously unable to see well. He stepped forward to have a closer look at the matte circle lying in Uglov’s palm. Petya, for some strange reason, had made a step forward also. The two of them almost bumped foreheads.

“It’s here, the glass,” Petya uttered simplemindedly.

Yevlakhov took one glimpse at the glass and screamed. Uglov’s first impulse was to pull his head into his shoulders. However, Ivan Pavlovitch hadn’t screamed from anger but from delight. He dashed toward the stand, made sure that the glass wasn’t there, then slapped himself on his knee. “Swiped it, huh?” he burst out laughing. “What a boy!”

“I didn’t mean to, honest I didn’t,” Petya began to laugh too.

“What a liar!”

“No, honest,” Petya said. “You came in so suddenly as I was looking at it, and then … I don’t know why I slipped it into my pocket …”

“Yeah, yeah—we know,” Yevlakhov gasped in between spasms of laughter. He acted now like the little mischievous boy Petya thought he had detected blades of before. Ivan Pavlovitch’s eyes glistened with excitement, he raised his eyebrows and his tousled hair gave his face an endearing look. Petya felt himself drawn to this man. …

“All right,” Ivan Pavlovitch said after his last spasm of laughter had died. “Now we can talk it over seriously,” as if there could have been no serious talk until the Tshassov glass had been swiped. “All right, young man, once again—why do you need this glass?”

Once again Petya explained that he needed this glass to complete an apparatus for use in physiology. But this time he spoke with emotion, and while he spoke a thought which had been knocking at his mind since he saw Skatchkov cautiously edged in—as if to tease: why *did* he need this glass? “I’m not a technician,” Petya said unsurely, “but it seems to me that if the surface, that is … if I could … then why, even the thinnest film might …”

Ivan Pavlovitch had been listening, blinking his eyes, “Uhm, well,” he said at last, realizing perhaps that his original judgement about this young man had been wrong, “now let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“To my house.”

“What for?”

“What for? To have dinner with me,” Ivan Pavlovitch said. “You’ll meet my family … By the way, you may keep the glass, too.”

8

Petya returned to his hotel in the tender frame of mind he usually got into after spending a pleasant evening with a friendly family. He had liked the whole Yevlakhov clan: the hostess—a little, nimble woman; the son—an oceanologist recently returned from the Antarctic; and the daughter with her husband—both doctors. They seemed to be a closely-knit family in spite of their presently divergent interests and separate homes. They had enjoyed Ivan Pavlovitch’s story about the “theft” of Tshassov’s glass; but whenever Croizé’s name was mentioned, somebody would promptly change the

subject. Those two didn't get along well, Petya knew now for sure. Whatever the reason the Frenchie was probably to blame, he thought.

Only a few hours left to catch his train to Perm at 10:40. He would see at least the Senate Square; Petya was already in the hallway when they called him to the telephone. It was Croizé's secretary. "Igor Lavrentyevitch was very sorry," she cooed. "A foreign delegation, you know …" Petya wondered whether the director had found out already about his visit to Yevlakhov. "Igor Lavrentyevitch would like you to stop in tomorrow about twelve," the secretary cajoled, "he'd like to have all the details …"

"I'm sorry," Petya said, "but I'm leaving tonight. Please give Igor Lavrentyevitch my best regards and also the best wishes of my chief, Professor Nikitin. So long."

"Ants in your pants, Croizé," he said to himself, sticking out his tongue, which was as long as an anteater's. He pranced from one end of the room to the other, then stopped in front of the mirror and began to jig. He hadn't even heard the knock at the door until somebody said, "You dancing?"

It was Valka. They never were in the habit of embracing—just a firm handshake. "You came after all," Petya said, looking over his friend. Valya Koloskov was still the same huge, baby-faced lug who always had trouble finding a hat for his head and never learned how to sit down without breaking a chair. They had been seeing each other rarely since Valya had left Perm to work in his own specialty, physics. However, when they'd meet they'd spend a whole night talking, just talking. Tamara had learned how to stay out of sight at such times.

But now they had just a few hours! "Hell, what luck," Petya fretted. "I had wanted so much to see Leningrad!"

"Why haven't you?" Valya asked. "You had plenty of time."

"I had but I have none now," Petya replied, and went on telling his friend about his travels between Croizé and Yevlakhov. "It's partly my own fault," he concluded.

"What next," Valya scolded. "You're always ready to blame yourself. These old gents don't realize it that the second half of the twentieth century is almost half over … Let's go."

"Where to?"

"Sightseeing!" Valya said. "Sure it's also your fault," he added, as they went down the flight of steps. "You ought to know better than not to know

how to take every hour as it comes."

They walked out into a light rain. But they hadn't noticed it until the sound of the Neva's waters merging with the Great Nevka hit their ears. They stood on the Petrograd Bank. Valya had wanted to show his friend the scenic view of the revolutionary ship *Aurora* anchored for eternity at the opposite shore, but the contours of the vessel were outlined now dimly in the fog and rain that enveloped the river. Yet, as far as Petya was concerned, Leningrad was still dear, flowing through the depths of his subconscious while his conscious mind was wholly absorbed by Valya's talk. Koloskov couldn't tell him much of his classified work under the famous Professor Winkler, but what he did say was so breathtaking that Petya realized how much happier his friend must be in *his* field.

They passed a newspaper stand. The photos of the dark side of the moon were on the first page. Petya was amazed how matter-of-factly Valya took the news. "Of course, it's quite a feat," he said, "but when you stop to think of it … nothing but a new way of travel. Take a train ride; do you stop to think what makes the engine go? So when we'll travel to Mars or Venus we won't question what makes the rockets move. Cosmic flights—just an application of old laws, nothing else. And new discoveries are still to come … Hey, you recognize this?" Valya pointed at a large building in the fog.

"What is it?" Petya asked.

"The Winter Palace."

"Oh." Petya was disappointed. He had expected it to be more elegant.

"You ought to see it from the other bank, from the columnal façade," Valya suggested, as they were crossing the palace bridge. "But to come back to your story, these two old gents—nothing but two points. Draw a line between them and … everything will become clear. Like a chart of a starry sky."

"I don't understand," Petya shook his head.

"That's because you're still a ninny," Koloskov said condescendingly. "Look you oaf," he suddenly pointed to his left, "there's the Academy of Sciences … and the University. Twelve departments!"

Everything looked smudged, as if seen through a thick, steamed-up glass. "Hell, what luck," Petya sighed. "What were you saying about those old gents?"

“I said that your story’s only a reflection of that incessant fight in science,” Valya declared. “Only the form changes. Take your experience: just a case of application and ingenuity.”

“More complicated than that,” Petya objected.

“Perhaps,” Valya agreed. “But in the end what difference does it make why Croizé has lost touch with science! As far as you and I are concerned we are only interested in him because he reveals a degree of scheming of which we had no idea. The old generation, they’re masters in it! I knew a brilliant scientist; he gave up his work, that is he delegated it to his assistants, and he himself devotes his talents to studying the personal relations between two academicians, call them ‘A’ and ‘B.’ And he has no selfish motive, mind you, just that he can’t live without meddling into other people’s business … as some people can’t live without smoking. The same with your Croizé … Hey look, there are the sphynxes!”

Through the countless granules of fog glimmering in the rain, the naked sphynxes stared meekly. “Nothing but scheming,” Petya repeated, “back-stabbing! A game of intrigue!”

“No worse than any other game,” Valya said. “Take horse races, for instance …”

“I don’t agree with you,” Petya interrupted. “I’m glad we don’t know about it any more than we do.”

“You think so? As I see it, it all depends how you react to it. I think in that respect we both might do well to learn a few things from the old gents.”

“Meaning what?”

“What?” Valya repeated. “That neither you nor I know too well how to enter somebody’s house gracefully, how to say hello, keep up a conversation, and say a polite goodbye. That’s what!”

“Fiddlesticks.”

“Not at all, pal,” Valya said earnestly. “We’ve time for everything but for civil manners.”

They had reached the Bridge of Lieutenant Schmidt. They could see it, but the rest of Leningrad would emerge momentarily out of the fog to vanish without giving too many clues about itself. Somewhere in that soup, it might have been near or far, was the Copper Horesman, the Admiralty, the senate …

“I’d like to tell you about that engineer,” Valya resumed, “who had a letter published in the *Komsomol.* What’s the use of poetry if you compare it with the rockets or computers he designed?”

“My boss,” Petya suggested, “he’s the same kind, and he has two doctorates.”

“Of course,” Valya sneered. “He’s the learned Doctor Goose. He and his kind of argument are a century old. Even Chekhov wrote that art can become as boring as eating every day. Still, you’ve got to eat!”

They had turned by now to the River Boulevard and found the Copper Horseman. In the narrow beam of a projected light that seemed to tear out a strip of the fog, the horseman had a worried look—as if the inclement weather was delaying his urgent errand.

“I came here with a group of architects,” Petya said. “All young fellows—like you and me. They all were of the same opinion: the older generation are bonzes—just sitting in our way. You know what bonzes are, Valya?”

“What are you taking me for?”

“Well, then, these bonzes have a gruesome influence in the architectural field. And how’s yours?”

“There’s plenty of them in ours, too,” Valya said, “but they don’t have it too easy there. They have to keep producing and if they don’t …”

Petya looked at his watch. “Is it time?” Valya asked.

They took a taxi back to the hotel. “It seems to me,” Valya reflected on his way back, “the question here is not of bonzes or the traditional conflict of fathers and sons, but in a different dimension—in a horizontal one.”

“Meaning?”

“One group’s only interested in what science is going to do tomorrow, and the other has a hard time in parting with yesterday. Don’t you think … Here, there’s the Public Library. Pal, why don’t you move to Leningrad?” Valya sighed.

“Can’t swing it.”

“Then why don’t you take off a week in the winter. You’ll come with me to Viborg and do some skating.”

“I doubt I’ll be able to get away,” Petya said. As always the topic of conversation came back to the question of how to arrange for more frequent meetings. Sharing impressions helped them to think, and yet, strangely enough, their personal relations seemed rather restrained.

Valya helped Petya with his luggage and saw him off to the Moscow Railroad Station. Shortly after the train pulled out Petya clambered onto the upper berth and went to sleep. He dreamed again, but when he awoke late at night it wasn't the dream that made him think. It was a strange impression, the kind that follows a long, involved nightmare. He had a feeling of emptiness, that something should have happened in that dream and hadn't. The memory of his friend waving goodbye from the platform had a cheering effect though. He lit the nightlamp and out of his suitcase he gingerly took the Tshassov glass. It looked cool, its nacreous center seemed to vibrate. Three days ago it had been nothing but a piece of glass that happened to have the physical properties he needed to finish his apparatus, and now it was an object tied up with a multitude of impressions. Something entirely new! So what if he hadn't really seen Leningrad. Hadn't he carried off with him the town of Yevlakhov and his family; the town of the little, frank Oganezov—the man who bore on his puny shoulders a huge enterprise? Hadn't he carried off with him the town of Valya Koloskov, the man who looked at the future with that same calm, cocky assurance he had since the third grade of elementary school?

Most important, however, Petya discovered something about himself: he knew now how much he had to learn about himself. Thoughts came and came. The thought that had occurred to him during the discussion with Yevlakhov: might it not bring a few changes into his set? Petya doubled up on his berth, pulled under his knobby knees and began to jot down on the back of a cigarette pack.

New ideas!

1965

Yonder-Wonder

by E. Cherepakhova

Ella Matveyevna Cherepakhova, born in 1936, graduated from the University of Moscow with a degree in journalism in 1958. Wrote for magazines Yunost', Literaturnaya Gazeta, *and* Smyena. *Her documentary novel appearing in serial form in* Smyena.

"Would you mind stopping here," Yuri Pavlovitch had said, having decided to kiss her.

They stood at the edge of the little town park. The wind was driving gay candy wrappers along bubbly snow drifts that had become glass-slippery from much thawing and refreezing. It wasn't the memory, nor the thought, but the aroma and the sounds of last summer, suppressed during the long winter days, that suddenly burst into the open of Masha's mind. It was the harsh odor of dry dust, the scent of flowers in front-yard gardens sprinkled by a scant rain, the harmonious shuffle of soles on the dance floor, and the abruptly quick laughter rolling along benches … Those little lamps in the park, few, dull-yellow, as small as tiny pumpkins, and the rhythmic brief refrain of a song from the raucous radio loudspeaker …

Yuri Pavlovitch's hand felt tight and heavy on her shoulder. He drew her to himself.

"Please don't," Masha pleaded weakly. Her body withered, unwillingly tensed, resisted …

But Yuri Pavlovitch either didn't understand or didn't listen. He kept pulling her, with some effort now, though maintaining a serious expression on his reddened face. He had light, almost invisible eyelashes, as thin as a

spider's web. Once again the wind drove a handful of wrappers—they drifted with a soft, crackling sound along the lumpy snow. Masha's lips felt cold and sore from his hard kiss.

From the nearby railroad station came an anguished, long wail of a locomotive, then a grating sound as the train jerked, gained speed and moved away.

"Oh, Masha, Masha," Yuri Pavlovitch mumbled happily, not letting her out of his embrace.

The wind is blowing right at us, Masha thought, feeling a painful pinching of the frost through her nylons. Why didn't I put on warmer stockings? she asked herself. She could hear and notice every little movement and every sound around her. Yet one thought kept surfacing to the wavy sea of her memories, splashing like a big fish, "Well, that's it, the end of my voyage …"

She heard the music and the summer whispers, and envisioned clearly the dull-yellow, tiny pumpkinlike lamps, Peter's stripeless shirt, looming vaguely white in the dark-blue stuffy air. And then, as now, her heart had begun to hammer at a heavy, uneven clip.

"So you're leaving?" she had asked, peering into Peter's dark, broad face. "You're going to jilt me? And stop pretending, you … you, thick-lipped monk." Peter wore his dark hair cut very short.

She had wanted to cry but her pride hadn't let her.

"Oh, stop it," Peter had confidently said, embracing her and picking lint off her dress. "You won't get lost for a while. And soon I'll have you come over to me … Just wait. As soon as I've built a marriage bureau I'll dash you off a telegram."

He had gone, had never written, and after he had helped build there a factory, houses and a marriage bureau, he had married some local girl and sent his mother a wedding card. "What a scoundrel," his mother had showed it to Masha. "Took after his father, his soul rest in peace." But inwardly Aunt Varya had been glad; she had never liked Masha. "Those textile girls," she'd sneer. "They're all high-handed."

And what about Yuri Pavlovitch? Masha returned to the present. So, let it be Yuri Pavlovitch. What difference does it make!

However, when he tried to kiss her again, without words and to her own surprise, she broke away from his embrace. As she stood there, her rosy

head-kerchief slipped down to her nape, Yuri Pavlovitch was slowly regaining his composure, blinking his eyes in embarassment. He was tall, very straight and rigid, his blue, ironed overcoat matching his blue beret. Masha found it strange to see him so awkwardly distraught. “Why am I behaving with him this way?” she asked herself, adjusting the kerchief on her head. “Your little boy is all right,” they tell me. Little boy! How can you call a teacher at the Technicum little boy! And then … he brings me flowers, not like that thick-lipped monk.

“What do you see in me?” she asked Yuri Pavlovitch. “Why don’t you find yourself some nice teacher or a nurse from the hospital … They would not be in the way of your development.”

“My heart has chosen you, Masha,” Yuri Pavlovitch said sadly, though in a triumphant voice. “You’re just in my taste … very much so.”

“You talk of me as if I were a bun or something,” Masha smiled. “But why do we stand in the wind? Let’s go before all our love is aired out.”

They walked out of the park, mincing their steps, skidding on the ice covered by a thin, greyish layer of drifted springlike snow. “You ought to think, Masha,” said Yuri Pavlovitch in an offended tone of voice. “Yeah, you ought to think a lot, because in the end every woman needs a home, a family … And besides, you’re no little girl anymore. I was told you’re twenty-five.”

Masha suddenly felt like laughing. She began to giggle and couldn’t stop until her eyes filled with tears, and when she stopped and leaned her forehead against the rough-barked pine tree, she began to cry. She cried because she was twenty-five years old and had found no true love. She wondered if it would ever come. A girl’s infinitely beautiful dreams had come to an end and people like Yuri Pavlovitch had marked off, so to say, their last borderline.

“So what? I’ll take and leave them,” Masha resolutely told herself. “Who do I have to ask?”

She tried to suppress the unexplainable anger that had begun to well up within her, force herself to feel differently, feel gratitude or something like it for the clear vision of a serene, well-rounded, peaceful life that awaited her with this man. Yuri Pavlovitch was reliable, so true-to-life reliable. He wouldn’t leave her, jilt her, nor forget her. But the sensation of an incomprehensible loss oppressed and gnawed Masha’s heart.

Her cry wasn't pretty. Long sobs, and frequent outbursts of anger.

"Masha, don't," Yuri Pavlovitch asserted, stepping from foot to foot and nervously cracking his knuckles. "Have I insulted you, Masha?"

She calmed down after a while. Away from the tree she got out her compact from her purse, wiped off the brown bark dust from her forehead, dried her cheeks, then powdered. For a second her glance lingered in the mirror. "There, I'm beautiful again," she said to herself with a sigh. "But sense … I've hardly got any."

They continued leisurely along the street. At the corner near the "Gastronom" they ran into Peter's mother. Aunt Varya cast them a quick, keen glance from under her fluffy kerchief and pursed her lips.

" 'Ilo, Aunt Varya," Masha called with a polite sneer, clasping Yuri Pavlovitch's arm. "How are things with you?"

"So, so," Aunt Varya replied, stuffing some restive hair back under her kerchief. She didn't feel comfortable in the presence of her son's one-time "steady," dressed up and arm-in-arm with a Technicum teacher. "So, so," she repeated. "But what's with you? You aren't sick or something? Your face is so …"

"We stood too long in the wind," Masha said, turning toward her silent escort. "It is his fault that I'm chilly," she added with feigned hurt in her voice, peevishly hitching her shoulder to give her almost-mother-in-law the impression that they weren't getting chilly here without any reason.

Aunt Varya seemed to get the hint because she pursed her lips again. "Petya's queenie," she suddenly announced, "is going to spill over any day now. They're hoping for a baby boy …"

As Aunt Varya bouncily waddled away, Masha stood watching her, her face set in bewildered anguish.

Yuri Pavlovitch walked her home. When on parting he doffed his beret and bowed, Masha was moved; never before had anybody shown her so much gentility.

"You better put it back on," she told him affectionately. "You may lose your hair from the chill."

For the next few days Masha moved about in a pensive stupor. At work at the factory she was often scolded for letting the yarn knot, just as any novice might do.

Yuri Pavlovitch began waiting for her at the exit. While walking her home he'd talk about the future. He had already submitted an application to the Housing Committee and hoped to be assigned a separate one-room apartment where they'd be able to start their new life. He had thought of every little detail. He had drawn with black crayon the blueprint of their future apartment and gave it to Masha on the eighth of March together with a box of "Manon" perfume. On the lower part of the blueprint next to the scale was a meticulously inscribed note: second copy.

On Saturdays Yuri Pavlovitch guided her to the movies. He always took expensive seats in the best row.

"You see all right, Masha?" he'd ask solicitously. "Since we have come to see a movie, we might as well see it as well as we can."

Masha would be cracking seeds while waiting for the red blind that covered the screen to quiver and creep up, opening the window into another world, a world full of wonders, far from this street, from this hall, and this town.

After the movie Yuri Pavlovitch would try to discuss the picture with her. He talked in a courteous, low voice while she looked at her feet, listened to the crackling of the last unthawed shell of ice underfoot, to the drip of an occasional water drop, and to the severely hooting factory siren signaling time for the midnight shift. There he goes winding up again, she'd think, here comes another lesson in political indoctrination.

"The most important thing is to capture the main thread of a picture," Yuri Pavlovitch would tell her gently.

"I like its love angle," Masha might confess with a sigh. "And I like a picture if it has a sad ending … or a lot of action. *The Amphibious Man* for instance. What a picture!"

Yuri Pavlovitch did not agree. He had read the papers and knew that *The Amphibious Man* was a crass movie, a Tarzan with gills.

The wedding wasn't far off—they had set the date for May. That is, Yuri Pavlovitch had set it. He was simply radiating as he ran about hustling and bustling. For her wedding gown he bought Masha a gorgeous white fabric, glittering, festive, fit for a stage actress.

"He's kind," Masha was telling herself. "Where can I find fault with him, where? He is just too kind, that's all. He's so solicitous … and so smart. … And he knows so much! Sure, he's kind.…"

One Sunday morning Yuri Pavlovitch was getting ready to go to the railroad station to pick up an important shipment. He had ordered from another town an ottoman with a yellow foam rubber mattress which was as spongy and porous as mud. He asked Masha to come with him.

"It's a Good-cause Sunday," she objected. "We've got to contribute some work toward the memorial statue; the whole town will be there."

"Yeah, yeah," he agreed. "I should come with you, you are right … but, would it be possible, perhaps, to make a cash contribution instead? What do you say, I'll go to the builders and, …"

He left the sentence unfinished; she was glaring at him with wide motionless eyes.

"Ooh, I can't stand you!" she said in a deep, throaty voice. "What a gnat! I wish I'd never looked at you." Masha was startled by her own fury with which she had hurled these words at Yuri Pavlovitch.

Yuri Pavlovitch was stunned. "I only asked, as kind of advice," he apologized. "Masha sweet, how can you be so touchy? What was so terrible in what I said? I only wanted to do something for us. All right, I won't. You don't want me to, so I won't. All right, let's do some good-cause work if you want us to. All right? You're not angry with me anymore? Funny girl! Why did you get so angry? It isn't good for your nerves to get so excited … and for nothing, for such trivialities. You shouldn't, Masha, you shouldn't … Masha sweet, you want some ice cream? Let's go, let's go …"

See, he gave in to me, Masha told herself. He is good to me. Everything will be all right, everything … as time goes by. Still, he's so smart and yet he didn't understand. Make a cash contribution, huh! It's him who is funny. But why? He didn't understand at first and then he did. That's all, finished.

In the following weeks Yuri Pavlovitch got into the habit of kissing Masha on parting. She didn't push him away anymore, though. Sometimes they'd walk up to his room which he rented in a quiet little alley quite a distance from her home. He kept his room tidy and well aired. On the landlady's old buffet stood a new ceramic tea service—ultra modern in white and black like piano keys. They'd drink tea and eat preserves from ceramic cups and plates, to the hoarse, jazzy tunes wafting softly from a dainty little battery-powered radio. Yuri Pavlovitch would appear extremely kind, bright, and pacific. He'd set Masha at the table, right beside the nickel-plated electric samovar, make her pose serving tea into the little

ceramic cups and, hunching at the window, he'd take countless pictures of her. He'd act this way almost every time she came; he'd always offer her the same kind of pastry—hard, round things with holes in the middle that looked like targets punched by bullets.

Everything in that room seemed to lend support to the authority and the tastes of its host—the seemingly brand-new overcoat that hung on a metallic hanger, the bellied samovar, or the square rasping little radio firmly encased in a leather holster.

Their arguments were few. Very few. Yuri Pavlovitch would crack his knuckles but maintain his composure. Masha couldn't do that. She put her heart into everything she did and when she flared up or stayed angry, she produced loud noises that made no sense at times. In the end Yuri Pavlovitch would have the last word—after all, he was the wiser and the more experienced of the two.

Once, Yuri Pavlovitch was waiting for her at the exit, Masha came out waving her arms in anger. "I did it," she announced still several steps away from him. "I had an argument with the shop super."

"Come now," Yuri Pavlovitch wondered, furrowing his brow. "It isn't becoming for a woman to argue."

"All right," Masha shouted back, "then why is he trying to play politics? That 'youth ought to master' bit of his, and a few other things, like he wants to transfer Dunyasha into the morning shift and have her disrupt her Technicum studies! And do you know what he says? She'll manage both somehow. How? What a way to fix a barrel—burn the staves and hide the hoops! This'll surely stop the leak. She'll manage both! What a snake! So I gave him a piece of my mind and Dunya? She's too good and too conscientious to raise her voice!" Masha expressively clenched her large, white hands.

Yuri Pavlovitch smiled with restraint. "You don't live within your means, Masha," he said in a low voice, shaking his head. "This isn't good."

Masha gave him a perplexed stare.

"No, no," Yuri Pavlovitch assured her with unhurried calmness, "I'm not talking about money. There're people who live within their means and others … who don't understand what in life ought to be touched and what mustn't. So they pay for their mistakes. You, Masha, are dear to my heart, therefore, I must give you some advice. That incident, don't worry about it,

a little tiff and … pht, it's forgotten. But for the future … you've got to know how to put fences around your world and your life, Masha, Here everything is yours, everything is important, here it's you and I, our home, our family … But there, behind it, there's all the rest and all of it is unimportant. Don't knock down the fence, Masha, don't destroy your life."

"But what if a person is being cut to pieces behind that fence? What if they scream for help?"

"Come, come," Yuri Pavlovitch said, giving Masha a light hug. "Come, come, don't go to extremes. I'm no coward. If I hear a plea for help I'll go and help. But—then I'll return home and shut the gate behind me. You know what I mean, Masha?"

Masha didn't reply.

That night, as she lay on her high, freshly-made bed, she couldn't fall asleep. Thoughts kept coming and coming, and the alarm clock kept ticking and ticking the time away. Behind one thin wall a baby was crying while a low feminine voice tried to calm it by lulling and pitying. Behind another wall there was a moving of chairs, a clanking of glasses, and a singing. Masha tossed and groaned, her head began to feel warm and heavy. At last, she sat up.

"What if I, too, got tired of being alone?" she asked into the darkness of her room. "What if I'm tired of it all? Am I not allowed to get tired? Does it have to be love the way it is in the movies? That same hopeless love? But that's only a movie, a ticket cost two quarters whereas here … this is life, life passes by …"

Behind the wall where glasses clanked a new sound suddenly rang out, a low strumming of a guitar. The firm, young voice of the visiting geologist whom she had seen once or twice before intoned the words of a simple, improvised song:

It may happen sometimes, sometimes we'll meet,

When the snow will look again like rain.

I'll have a pussy willow, yellow soft as down,

And you'll come'n walk on this very, very street.

Masha felt a sweet throb in her heart. She pressed her disheveled head against the cool wall. The song continued:

It may happen sometimes, sometimes we'll meet,

And your face will flash in the happy crowd.

In the shopping net,

A can of concentrate,

Half-a-loaf of bread.

The same green overcoat,

And on your neck … that dear, old scarf.

Oh, there you go—

Kicking on a lump of ice,

Oh, there you go, no thought's bothering you,

Whereas me, I do remember everything.

Without turning on the light, Masha pulled on her dress and went out into the kitchen. She leaned against the windowsill, in order not to have to listen to that song which stirred up restless memories.

I'm getting jittery, she thought uneasily.

There was a short squeak behind her back and a man stepped into the kitchen—unhurriedly, without closing the door behind himself. He was rather small, but well-built and broad-shouldered. His coarse, curly hair didn't even stir in the draft. He gave Masha a green-eyed, gaily informal once-over and whistled. "Look what we have here, not bad. Where have you been?"

"What do you mean where?" Masha blushed. "In my room."

"No, no. I mean where were you five, ten years ago, hell, where were you then?" he explained with a smile. "Those braids of yours, they look like

snakes."

He lit his pipe, puffed, inhaling greedily, pleasurably, and filling the whole kitchenette with a choking smoke. "They didn't let you sleep, girlie?" he asked after taking the pipe out of his mouth and squeezing it in the palm of his hand. "Or was it, perhaps, insomnia?"

Masha made no reply.

"Come on, tell me," he coaxed. "You can tell me everything. I'm leaving in an hour, and then you'll never see me again. Come on."

"What's there to tell?" Masha said, averting her eyes. "Nothing to complain about. I'm about to get married soon, the harness has been bought already …"

"You want to say you don't love him?"

"We're going to have a family, a home," Masha continued. "I'll love my children. And what you've just asked, this happens only in the movies … I think."

"My dear girl," the man said softly. "I've had a few drinks, you'll have to excuse me. I'm also probably a little sentimental, but listen to me. A person needs happiness, lots of happiness. He should eat happiness, drink happiness, bathe in happiness, and wallow in it as in golden sand. Hell, he *ought* to be happy. This is a … must! This is the vitamin of life. Do I make sense? I've had a few drinks, but never mind. You know, when I was a child, before I'd fall asleep at night I'd close my eyes and whisper those very cherished desires, and then hold my breath, waiting and waiting, counting: one, two, three. Then I'd hear distinctly the flapping of huge wings and know that it was coming. What? A huge bird of wonderment, one wing blue, the other red. Yonder-wonder, I'd call it. My bird of happiness! It made everything come true, everything, everything. I grew up, and grew old, and my bird is still winging down to me whenever I call it. Whenever I'm not too greedy, too cowardly, too timid, and whenever I'm honest with others and myself. Most of all myself, you hear? One wing blue, the other red …"

"You've asked me if I loved or didn't love," Masha challenged fervently. "With him, you don't know how to act. You try to clutch at his sides, they're too smooth, you break your fingernails. And yet, he seems like any other man."

“Only seems like?” the man prodded. “Now look here, Girlie. I’m going to tell you something, something which is a secret. In some town there was once a wondermaster who had a shop in which he made dummies. You should’ve seen the superb dummies that man made! And you should’ve seen the clothes he designed for them! He made them look alive, like people! Almost like people! Well, one evening he somehow forgot to lock the door of his shop and the dummies broke out into the world. Nobody stopped them because they looked like people … almost like people. So these dummies scattered throughout towns and villages. Some of them even married. After all, they were almost like people. Just that they had no human warmth … and also, no life ever came from them. That was all. Oh, Girlie, listen to me, remember well my little tale and take heed. You may find such a dummy anywhere. Please watch out for them, I implore you. Well, I’ve got to go. So long, Girlie.”

The man bowed his curly head interspersed with grey and for a split second clung to Masha’s large, coarse hand.

She saw him plod away, energetically swinging his suitcase. He was bareheaded, his coarse hair didn’t stir in the wind. Masha thought for a while and then threw her overcoat over her shoulder and walked out into the night. It was daybreak. The trunks of pine trees rising along the street gleamed bronze-reddish in the glow of dawn whereas the twigs loomed like dark funnels. The trees stood motionless, like trumpets waiting for the skilled hand of some unknown giant musician. Suddenly, over the houses, over the road, and over the pine trees, the crystal-clear, blue air high above was pinged by a strange winter bird. A joyously alarming premonition suddenly tweaked Masha’s heart. For a second she remembered Yuri Pavlovitch, his tall, erect, straight figure, his smooth, gentle voice.

“No, no, no!” she exclaimed. It was the whisper of anguished passion, the sweet ache of liberation. The sharp morning breeze caressed her face. She slowly squinted her eyes and began to count, “One, two, three … So where are you my Yonder-wonder? Where are you, my bird of happiness? Come aflying.”

1966

A Case of Geophobia

by Georgi Gulia

Georgi Dmitryevitch Gulia, born 1913. His first novel, On The Incline, *appeared in 1930. In his novel* As Long As The Earth Turns, *published in 1962, Gulia depicts the life and work of Soviet scientists.*

It was Sunday and Matamey Larsanba could allow himself the luxury of staying in bed an extra half-hour. There were at least two reasons for that, first—youth, and second—his position as secretary of the village Soviet, either reason not being devoid of a certain sanctioned dose of country leisure.

His parents, with whom he lived, went out of their way to spoil him. The young man's father never chided him for those extra moments in bed which he enjoyed lying idle and thinking of nothing, while his mother always brought him a glass of hot milk and a bowl of cold hominy right to his bedside, as if he were a decrepit old prince.

This morning, however, there was to be none of the traditional half-hour of leisure nor the usual meal by Mother's job-weary hands. Somebody was calling—he had to dress in a hurry and go out onto the porch.

"Are you asleep?" asked Saat Chkok, the school janitor. He was quite excited.

"Not any more," Matamey said. "Anything happen?"

"Yes," Saat informed, coming up onto the porch.

There is nothing worse than living close to the village Soviet or the school, Matamey thought. Anything happens and there they come crawling to you as if you were holy Mecca. He yawned langorously.

Saat, unshaven and now looking easily over fifty, sat down on the bench and asked for a smoke. It was a hot July morning, and the chickens, turkeys and other fowl already seemed worn out. In the distance the mountains exuded a light greyish mist through cool ravines. The day promised to be sultry.

"You knew our principal, of course?" Saat asked.

"What do you mean, 'knew,'? I know him very well."

"I say 'knew' because I'm not sure he's still alive."

Matamey was flabbergasted. "Andrey Butba dead?" he exclaimed. "But I just saw him last night!"

"I don't insist he's dead," Saat corrected himself. "But I can't prove he's alive either. Something strange happened to him. That's why I came running to you so early in the morning. Were it not for that I'd be digging in my garden now. It's just the right season to tie up the tomatoes and give the beds a good watering. Because if we have a drought I'll have to toil in the garden every day from sunrise to sunset and maybe even nights."

"We said, 'goodbye' about ten last night," Matamey recalled aloud. "He told me he wanted to work a little longer in his office."

"My woman saw him this morning. So pale he was! I bet he didn't sleep the whole night. He sprinkled some water on his face at the well and told her not to look for him. 'I can't go on any longer,' he said to her. He said he was running off into the mountains—maybe even farther."

"Farther than the mountains?" Matamey wondered.

"That's what he said."

"What did he mean by that?"

"Who can tell, Matamey? He wasn't a bad fellow. Fooling around with his books all the time. Even nights. Now that's carrying it to far," Saat opined.

"All mathematicians are a little crazy," Matamey said.

"Why should they go out of their minds?" Saat asked with a smile. "Maybe they figure each number is a ruble? Can you imagine, two million? Of what? Rubles? Every night?"

"But why just two million?"

"I don't know," Saat drew deeply on his cigarette. "Maybe a hundred and fifty. Maybe as many rubles as kilometers to the sun."

Matamey washed in a hurry, combed his hair, and put on his walking slippers. “I am ready,” he declared. “Let’s go.”

His mother only managed to see his hat as he closed the squeaking gate. The milk remained untouched.

2

The principal’s office was locked. According to Selma, Saat’s wife, the light had been on all night in one of the classrooms, in the seventh grade, to be exact.

“How do you know?” Matamey asked. “Did you get up at night?”

“No,” Selma explained. “The office is clean but the classroom is smoky.”

“She has a nose like a hound,” Saat acknowledged. “If she says so, you may be sure it is so.”

The seventh grade classroom bore the marks of an all-night job: a blackboard motley with mathematical formulas, papers littered over the desk and on the students’ pulpits, cigaret butts on the floor, and an empty matchbox. The air was stuffy.

“He must have had the windows closed,” Matamey said.

“He never liked fresh air,” Selma pointed out.

“He was afraid of catching cold,” Saat added.

Matamey picked up several notebook leaves—nothing but formulas. On the desk—formulas too. Velocities in kilometer-hours, distances in thousands of kilometers, powers in H.P.’s, and on the globe there, dotted trajectories shooting out from some unknown point, each marked with Roman numerals. Beside the globe, a chart—apparently to measure distances and velocities.

“What was he figuring?” the secretary wondered.

“Who knows,” Saat said.

“Didn’t he ever tell you anything?” Matamey asked Selma.

Selma, a withering woman, first shook her head in denial. “He was a strange man, though,” she added cautiously.

“We know that.”

“Besides,” she went on, “I never listened to him much anyway. Only when he told me to light the fire in the oven or sweep the floor …”

“Yah, yah,” the secretary of the village Soviet became annoyed. “Yah, we know all about lighting fires or sweeping floors, but this here, dear Selma, is a matter of much greater importance.”

Selma frowned. What is of greater importance than floors or an oven? she thought. That young official thinks too much of himself.

“Please think, what else did he tell you?” the janitor prodded his wife. “Think harder.”

“If I think harder, there’s nothing really. All sorts of junk.”

“I’ve no doubt,” Matamey said while looking through papers and studying attentively the mathematical equations on the board, “I’ve no doubt that our principal was working on some complicated calculations. As I can see, he was doing some research on flights.”

“On flights, really?” Saat asked in astonishment.

“I remember now,” Selma suddenly cheered up. “Only yesterday morning Andrey was telling me that in a few minutes one could fly as far as … I just can’t remember how far …”

“Here’re the flight plans,” Matamey showed the couple a circle encompassed with dotted trajectories.

“Nothing but foolery,” Saat decided.

Selma remembered something else, something that had seemed to come in one ear and go out the other. “He said the earth we live on is crowded as a yard.”

“What kind of yard, esteemed Selma?”

“A schoolyard.”

Saat chuckled. “If you ask me, Andrey’s senses went farther than his mind. No man of reason will start claiming that the earth is small. Just try and hike around the earth by foot, why, even our district. You’ll get nothing but corns and wear out more than half a dozen shoes. To tell you the truth, I had been noticing something funny about our principal for quite some time.”

“What for instance?” Matamey wanted to know, still studying Andrey Butba’s notes.

The janitor recalled a conversation between himself and Andrey of about two weeks earlier. A huge moon had been hanging in the sky, and while his wife had been sleeping like “a sack of wheat,” he couldn’t doze off. The principal had seemed exhausted. In the moonlight he looked like a man

made of clay. His eyes, two glowing embers on a pale face, had drawn Saat's particular attention. Of course, the janitor started to speak about the weather, namely that on a beautiful night like this one felt like soaring up like a bird.

"Like what?" the principal had asked, as if he hadn't heard.

Saat had repeated his thought about the bird.

The principal sat down on his haunches, pulled out a pencil and began to draw some lines on the ground. What he drew the janitor couldn't remember now nor had he been giving them any special notice. As a true son of the soil, a man of beds and green stems, Saat was an alien to any abstraction or even romanticism once it tended to tear him away from his fenced-in vegetable garden.

That night Andrey Butba had seemed to be reading some invisible letters. He had been talking in precise, clipped sentences, separating them by a fair amount of pauses. "Saat," he had said, "let's assume that the speed of flying machines in one year will increase by twenty to thirty percent. Now, the speed of three "M" gives already more than three-and-a-half thousand kilometers per hour. But that's not the limit. Rocket planes can cover almost the whole earth in half an hour. But that's not the limit either. Listen, Saat, don't you think the earth is getting cramped?"

"Cramped? What do you mean, esteemed Andrey?"

"Very simple. Cramped like a prison cell. Only a few steps from corner to corner. Do you understand now?"

"No," Saat had frankly admitted.

"Well, how else shall I explain it? It's like, don't you feel crowded on your vegetable plot?"

Saat had laughed out heartily. "Esteemed Andrey, on my vegetable plot I feel like on a shoreless sea—from one bed of tomatoes to the next planted with radishes its as far as from here to the Dardanelles. So help me. And why? Because I love my garden and adore the soil. I'm like a worm in the earth, so tiny, that sometimes I think I need a telescope."

"Crazy."

"I don't care. Maybe I am. And what makes me crazy? The earth."

"Listen Saat, how can you talk about a little spot of ground as if it were the universe?"

"And why not?"

“Come on, you’re not a worm.”

“And why not?”

“You just want to make me furious.”

“I’m not sure who’s doing which, esteemed Andrey.”

“It’s incredible, Saat. You call a plot of ground the universe, or even a planet. Our globe is a tiny part of the universe and that piece of earth growing five kilos of cucumbers and maybe that much of radishes …”

“Kindly do not insult my garden,” Saat interrupted. “To me it’s dearer than life.”

“And what about the universe?”

“What universe?”

“Our galaxy.”

“What the devil do I need it for? I’ve got enough of my few spans of earth where I feel like a king’s uncle.”

“Don’t you *ever* feel cramped, Saat?”

“Me cramped? Me? Never!” Saat had emphatically declared. “It’s amazing, when I enter my garden and the gate squeaks behind me like a kitten, I’m telling you, I feel very good … Very good indeed.”

Andrey Butba had shaken his head sadly. “Absolutely no co-ordination of space,” he had said, as if to himself. “A pitiful attachment to a two-dimensional world. A pithecanthropus view of reality …”

“I don’t understand you, Andrey.”

Saat hadn’t felt good that night. In the end it had dawned upon him that the principal was a sick man.

Selma agreed with her husband. “Andrey thought the whole world was too crowded for him,” she concluded.

“The whole world?” Matamey found it incredulous.

“Yes, the whole world.”

“Wait a moment, here’s a note,” Matamey picked up a slip of paper from the floor. He read it carefully, then looked from Selma to her husband. They’re telling the truth, he thought. Once again he read the note, unquestionably Andrey’s.

“All right,” he told Selma, “collect all these papers, everyone of them, and keep them in a safe place. The militia may want to look at them, and now, Saat, I think we ought to go and look for our principal.”

“Look for him where?”

“I don’t know myself where,” the secretary of the village Soviet said. “If one is to agree with what Andrey wrote on that note, the whole world is one big jail cell, and our principal might be at this moment even as far as the end of the world.”

The husband and wife glanced at each other.

“I’m sorry for him,” Selma said. “Thirty already and no living soul in the world. Always alone. And all those papers. That’s enough to make you lose your marbles.”

“With a wife he’d have gone off his head much sooner,” Saat observed. “Your family isn’t that much of a honey pot.”

The woman didn’t argue with her husband. This toiler drudging in his soil from morning to night, she thought, could also use some of God’s wisdom.

The men left.

3

It was a sweltering sun. Matamey and Saat crossed the schoolyard and took shelter under an acacia tree growing at the gate. It was cool in the shadow; one found it hard to believe that the great fire in the sky was still scorching the earth.

The secretary of the village Soviet was contemplating the plan of action. He was reluctant to stir up a commotion about the mysterious disappearance of the principal who, after all, was a co-villager and neighbor. Besides, Andrey might not have disappeared, he might have decided to go to town on a Sunday.

“Saat,” he suggested, “let’s for the time being keep the whole matter between the two of us.”

“Oh sure, sure,” the janitor agreed.

The village store was no more than a hundred paces away. It may be a good idea to stop in at the trading post and possibly pick up some news, Matamey thought.

“If we have no rain everything will burn out to a crisp,” Saat pondered aloud.

“Everything but your little garden,” Matamey countered.

“Yes, I’ll have to save it,” the janitor consented. “I’ll water it every night, even if I have to carry the water in my mouth. I won’t let it die.” They were slowly walking to the store.

“Saat,” Matamey asked, “is there anything in the world you love more than your garden?”

Saat considered the reply for a moment. “No,” he declared.

“That’s good.”

“What’s good?”

“It’s good that you’re like that, Saat.”

“You may laugh as much as you want, but my soul is in the garden.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“I’ll never understand that Butba,” the janitor went on. “Maybe he’s a saint and I’m an arrant sinner. It must be either or. There he goes climbing somewhere up to the skies and me, I feel blissful staying here on earth. Do you understand, Matamey? Fresh cheese, hot hominy and fresh fruit—what else does a soul need?”

“Nothing else, according to you. Isn’t that so?”

“Absolutely a null nil.”

“That’s a thought worth mulling over,” Matamey said, walking up onto the concrete step of the village store.

Behind the counter, as usual, stuck out the lean, lanky storekeeper Kadyr Eshba, a fellow who seemed not to belong to this village store where the ceiling was low and all the commercial activity limited to a trade of low finances. Eshba’s humped nose and thin neck might look good in a flourishing city univermag but never here in this shanty which always smelled of sour milk and household soaps.

“Good morning, Kadyr,” Matamey announced. “How’s life? How’s business?”

The storekeeper’s reply was curt but to the point—a raised index finger of his right hand.

“That’s good,” Matamey said. “It’s a pleasure to see a man who always greets you pleasantly and each time in a different way.”

“Our Kadyr will never cheat anybody,” Saat remarked obsequiously, sitting down on an empty nail box.

“You see,” Kadyr explained, “every time you’re about to cheat somebody you stop and think. And you refigure again and again. You’ve got

to have a head for that … And you always ask yourself, what for? Do you really have to?"

It was a quiet morning, with no buyers around, and that had set Eshba in a philosophical frame of mind.

"I see they haven't given you the jitters yet today," Matamey said. "You're still in a good mood."

"Right you are," the store manager agreed. "You're my first customers if I'm not to count the school principal who showed up quite early, almost at daybreak."

Matamey and Saat exchanged knowing glances. "What did he want so early in the morning?" the secretary of the village Soviet pretended indifference.

"Bread, sugar," Kadyr said. "He also bought a knapsack, like the one tourists buy. I had it lying around for a whole year …"

"A knapsack?" Matamey perked up. "What did he want with that?"

"He said he was going up to the mountains."

"Where?"

"Up to the mountains," the storekeeper repeated. "Toward Suipsara."

"For long?"

"That he didn't tell me."

Matamey leaned against the counter. "You see, Kadyr," he confided, his head on his elbows, "our principal is not at school. Please tell us where he is; we need him desperately."

Saat nodded in agreement.

"But I've told you where," Eshba said. "He's on Suipsara, that is, not there yet, on his way there."

"What would he want there?" Matamey asked in a hollow voice.

The country Mercury did not know that. "It might be just for a little walk," he suggested. "Something like a tourist, it's quite fashionable nowadays …"

"A little walk?" Matamey couldn't hide his astonishment. "By himself? Without telling anyone?"

"He was very absentminded," Kadyr spread his stalklike arms. "Hadn't brought any money with him. I had to give it to him on credit."

"Why didn't he run over for the money. It's just next door."

“Andrey was terribly rushed.”

“To climb the Suipsara? Without money? Didn’t you think that was rather strange, Kadyr?” the secretary of the village Soviet demanded.

“No. Now I do, though,” Eshba admitted.

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Matamey said. “Between us, he disappeared under mysterious circumstances.”

Kadyr crossed his arms and gaped at Matamey.

“He wrote up a lot of little paper slips,” Saat remarked.

“What kind of paper slips?”

“Just paper slips, from a notebook.”

There was the noise of a car outside. The obese doctor Daj Bganba scrambled out of the vehicle. In spite of his forty years and generally-known gluttony, the doctor still looked spry and fit. People who ought to know maintained that it could have been worse, as a matter of fact so bad that no truck would have been able to hold him up.

“Greetings to an honest group,” the doctor boomed. “I’m at your mercy, Kadyr. Save me. A bottle of mineral, please, I beg you.”

“After last night?”

“Doctor?” Matamey asked. “Which way are you going?”

“Into town.”

“Will you give us a lift to the mill?”

“Unquestionably.”

The doctor rinsed his throat, emptied two bottles of mineral (his usual ration), and after throwing a few coins on the counter, he wheelbarrowed his belly toward the car. Strangely enough, though, when the car rolled out onto the road, it moved rather smartly, without a hitch.

4

Saat dozed off at the end of the first kilometer. Matamey curiously watched the expression on the doctor’s face as he was swearing at each road bump. “Listen, Daj,” he asked the epicurean physician when they reached the asphalt highway, “was our school principal ever your patient?”

“You better ask who wasn’t.”

“Take me, for instance.”

The doctor gave him a wry look. “Just wait until you catch something and you’ll come running to me.”

“You’re sure?”

“You mean that you’ll catch something?”

“Yes.”

“Quite.”

“What are you going to do in town?”

“My friend,” the doctor bubbled, “I’m going to welcome the steamer *Abkhazya*. First, a few boys and myself are going to have some Odessa beer, then we’ll take a ride to the railroad station where they sell the best cognac, on the Moscow-Erevan express, you know.”

“Quite some program,” Matamey sighed.

“I should think so.”

Matamey returned to the original question. “So Audrey Butba was a patient of yours?”

“What do you mean ‘was’? He still is.”

“I’m asking you officially as the secretary of the village Soviet.”

“And I’m answering officially,” the doctor slowed down. “What happened?” he seemed worried.

Matamey found it difficult to believe that the doctor was worried about a patient. He had always thought there was not a humane vein in that mass of flesh of Daj’s. How could a physician be humane when he fleeced his patients out of eggs, live chickens, sour milk—apart from the money he took. He told the good doctor about the principal’s disappearance. “Any opinions?”

The doctor switched to high gear again. “A psycho, that’s what he is,” he declared, waving his arm.

Matamey was astonished.

“Why should you find it so strange?” Daj asked. “We’re all psychos. I’m a psycho, you’re a psycho, everybody … This is the atomic age, mind you. Psycho doesn’t necessarily mean insane, just well … as we say, a variety of a neurosis. Andrey, though, let me tell you, is a true psychopath. He racks his brains too much and thinks too hard. To a colleague I’d diagnose his sickness as agoraphobia.”

“Agoraphobia? What’s that Daj?”

“Fear of open spaces. A man suffering from this sickness locks himself in a closet …”

“Not at all, Daj, not at all,” Matamey interrupted.

Daj stopped the car on the road shoulder. “What not at all?” he asked, turning his thick-lipped face to the secretary.

“What I think, Daj, is that Andrey was not afraid of his house or the village.”

“Of what was he afraid then?”

“Of the earth. The earth began to look tiny to him.”

The doctor opened his mouth wide with astonishment. “In that case,” he shouted after a pause, waking Saat, “if what you say is true, his sickness is *geophobia,* fear of the earth. It is the sickness of our cosmic age. You see, man begins to feel cramped on this earth, he wants up, up through right there,” Daj stuck his finger into the ceiling of the car. “That reminds me, I’ll have to scrounge up a lamp for the ceiling.”

The doctor’s diagnosis seemed correct. Geophobia, this *was* something new. Was anybody else ever afflicted by it? Matamey asked himself. Hardly. Anyway neither Socrates nor Pythagoras could have had it. So where did this village scientist contract it? Apparently that thin, effeminate, semi-egghead semi-peasant was deluded by his own fantasies and calculations into a positive belief that his fantasy was not a legend but the reality. In the end, as the world became too crowded for him, or rather, for his thoughts, Andrey began to feel bad … That’s how it must have been.

“Where did you say you were going?” the doctor asked, stepping on the gas.

“To the grain mill,” Matamey replied. “We want to have a talk with Butba’s only relative.”

“I understand,” Daj bellowed. He handled the car as surely as he examined a patient’s heart or felt his pulse, driving in a detached way, not being distracted by anything approaching or overtaking him. “Don’t worry,” he comforted Matamey on parting, “we’re all psychos. Our Andrey Butba won’t get lost. Give him my regards.”

The mill was as busy as on a workday: the river roared, the grindstones grated, a thin flour dust hung in the air. The miller, Mas Bargandgia, sat on a big stone, smoking a pipe. Very likely in immemorial times of Homer, when the Argonaut plied toward the shore of Caucasus, the Colchice had mills like this; and then, too, like now, streams flowed down along clay beds in the shades of inaccessible blackberry bushes. In short, this place had the aura of antiquity, an antiquity that was lovable, a little melancholy but very dear to sentimental souls.

Sprinkled with corn powder, Mas appeared to be as antique an establishment as his rather crooked, rather musty, rather overworked millhouse. And yet, he was only sixty-five years young, young indeed by Abkhaz standards of age.

The heavy duty of reporting to the miller the highly unpleasant news of Butba's disappearance was left to Saat. It was supposed that no matter how distant a relative Andrey was, Mas' humanitarian heart would shrink at the first words of the grief-bearer, and Saat, being the senior by age, was more endowed to fulfill that mission than the younger village Soviet secretary.

Their arrival was a surprise to Mas—not too often did the secretary of the village Soviet visit a grain mill. He offered Matamey a seat on the stone while he let himself down onto the shaky steps leading to the oscillating mill yawn.

"God beware if this dry spell lasts a little longer," the janitor opened the conversation, panting heavily.

"What if it does?" the miller asked.

"The crop will be lost."

"It won't, Saat," Mas assured. "Nature knows its business. Nature is no mill. A mill needs someone to look after it, but nature can get along without us."

"Easy to say," Saat denied. "I say just take and mix things up and you won't have anybody to blame but yourself."

"It's always like that," Matamey observed. "If no rain is coming, there won't be any. If there's a hot spell, there will be one too. You might stand on your hands but you won't change it."

These somber thoughts brought to mind not only a man's helplessness but our planet's shortcomings as well. Hell, no wonder that Andrey didn't feel well.

“See that accursed water,” the miller pointed his index finger over his shoulder toward the roaring stream. “That water will teach wisdom to any fool. You sit here day after day and listen to it bubbling to you all sorts of rigmarole. And yet, that thing there is not even alive. To be a good miller you’ve got to have a head on your shoulders—you need no hands at all. And what do you need not to worry about droughts or torrents? A heart. I’m serious. A heart will make you love the soil and this means everything—a good crop and riches. Because love comes from the heart! And from love comes good crops. So stop blaming nature. Nature hasn’t changed since creation and it’ll be the same on doomsday in the Valley of Jehoshaphat.”

“In other words that little river will take you to the Bible,” Matamey said.

“You mean you have read the Bible?”

“No.”

“But I studied it,” Mas went on. “In parish school. And why am I telling you all this? You’ve got to have wisdom, like an apostle. But we, all we’re concerned about is petty business, how to live through today … But do we think about tomorrow? Or what’s going to be a hundred years from now?”

“We think about it,” Matamey said hesitantly.

“Fiddlesticks! We don’t. Take Saat, for instance. What do *you* think about, Saat?”

Saat smiled. “You want an honest answer?”

“What else.”

“I think it would be nice to have a bite. Haven’t had a poppy seed to eat since early morning.”

Without a word in reply the miller went inside and brought out a few pieces of cold churek meat pie, cheese and a bottle of wine. Saat didn’t refuse. “Matamey and I are hungry like dogs,” he said, “How about a glass?”

The miller rinsed a glass in the stream and handed it to the janitor.

“The thing is this,” Saat resumed, “Matamey and I have been out since early morning on an unpleasant task. … To your health,” he took a sip of wine and poured some to Matamey who being the younger had politely refused it earlier. The miller had guessed that those two did not come just for a chat. And the conversation about the weather was not just chat either. Whoever heard of people traveling for hours then talking about the

weather? Only fools would do such a thing and their number in the world was apparently getting smaller and smaller. Therefore, he was waiting patiently for his guests to broach the true topic. His patience was rewarded.

"Listen, Mas," the janitor inquired. "Did Andrey Butba stop here this morning?"

"Andrey? I haven't seen him in ages."

"Strange!"

"What is strange?"

"You see, Mas, Andrey has disappeared somewhere. We've decided to ask you, in any case. After all, he's a relative of yours, even if many times removed. …"

The village Soviet secretary broke into the conversation and nimbly, in a few words, presented the gist of the matter to Mas. The young man, being quite prudent for his age, was careful to leave out the guesswork and skip the geophobia bit, as well as their conversation with the doctor. It was absolutely necessary not to tax the old relative's heart.

Listening with the utmost attentiveness of which only the ancient wise men were capable, the miller puffed on his pipe and stared at the tip of his slipper. Finally, after an agonizing pause, also according to the ways of the ancient, he uttered in a firm and decisive voice, "He was taken ill!"

"Why should you think so?" Matamey tried to comfort him.

Saat hastened to clarify: "Andrey began to feel cramped on this earth. He felt crowded like your grindstone in your little pantry. So he fled to Suipsara."

"But why the Suipsara?"

Saat spread his arms.

"No doubt I, too, will have to set out to search for him," Mas announced, as if the matter were settled. Then he rose, covered the dike to halt the grindstones, and hung up a barn lock on the door.

"I'm ready," he exclaimed.

Saat emptied the wine bottle to the last drop, took a bite of cheese, and apparently having regained his strength, he, too, was ready to go to the end of the world. Using an old cliché, he said, "When the belly is full, the legs are ready."

"What's that sickness called, Matamey?" the miller asked. "Come on, tell me, don't be shy."

“It’s a new sickness. Andrey’s the first to have it.”

“In other words, there’s no cure for it yet.”

“That I don’t know,” Matamey was evasive. “A man begins to feel crowded on this earth, but he doesn’t run to do away with himself—he runs to the open spaces. He climbs mountains. He wants to be closer to the stars. He believes he has outgrown the cocoon he was born in. He wants the universe!”

A pensive mood overcame Mas. “He wants to go to the moon,” he finally said, after shaking off some flour dust.

“Maybe even farther.”

“How much farther can you go?”

“To the stars.”

“A bad sickness,” Mas diagnosed.

“What could be worse?” Saat consented. “You don’t have to crawl out of your skin to run away someplace. Let me tell you this: my garden is cleaner than any moon or any star. Just make a little hocus-pocus over your fruit and watch them fill up with juices. No friends, give me a million, and I still won’t leave this earth. I’m tied to the earth with such a strong navel cord that nobody can cut it.”

“Old wives’ tales,” Matamey waved his arm. “A mite’s philosophy.”

“Who needs giant philosophies?” Saat argued, “I’m teensy-weensy and so’s my philosophy. Isn’t one sick man enough?” he began to shout. “Go and get people back to earth!”

Matamey shuddered. Another one going off his mind, he thought glumly.

“Let’s go,” Mas suggested. “We’ll have time to argue on the way.”

6

Mas Bargandgia walked in silence, tilting out his torso as if he were spinning the terrestial globe with his feet. He was wondering what the farmers would think when they’d come at noon for their flour and wouldn’t be able to get it. And all because of that Andrey’s foolish obsession. He was always like that, even as a boy. In the privacy of his mind Mas had to admit to himself: kinship is kinship, no matter how far removed.

Without seeming to be tiring through chatter, Saat talked and talked. His words were flowing like the river that turned the waterwheel. However, his

words never moved anyone to work—they were like the leaves in the wind. When it came to long-winded speeches, Saat was a master. Instead of saying simply, “I planted parsley,” he said, “I planted a great little grass which, so help me, adds aroma to any sauce and brings a good price on the bazaar so that, you see, it’ll not only pay for itself but even bring in a nice little profit too, that is if I nurse it through properly and don’t let it look like a withered grass on a dry summer.” Passing to tomatoes, he marveled, “Those little red globes that I planted on my beds, the ones that resemble gold, those things known by simple names, they’re quite expensive, quite expensive.” He went on telling how he’d crumble clumps of manure with his fingers, with greater solicitude and patience than that of Benvenuto Cellini in minting the medals for the pope. Saat was capable of quoting fruit prices for the last ten years faster than any cybernetic machine, although he had no conception whatsoever of logarithms, square roots, not to mention cubic roots. His knowledge in that area was limited to the multiplication table found on the students’ notebook covers. Fools like him were to be counted on one’s fingers in the whole of Abkhazia.

If only we could hitch a ride, Matamey thought. But that was out of the question; this dusty road was nothing but a mule track, and besides, who’d go up this way on a Sunday? He was getting quite hungry and couldn’t imagine how long they’d have to go on without food. “Listen, Saat,” he said, “your talk about fruit is giving me an appetite.”

“I know it does,” Saat said cheerfully, “my fruit will do even more than that.”

“Windbag,” Mas growled.

“What did you say?”

“I said you’re full of wind, Saat,” the miller told him. “What kind of rubbish are you telling about grasses? A grass is a grass, no matter how you look at it.”

Saat stopped as if he had bumped against an invisible wall. “Are you serious?” he shouted.

“Quite.”

Saat quickened his pace. “Oh grief,” he uttered like a stricken Hamlet. “The day you don’t have this grass around you may write off everything.”

“No I won’t. I won’t write off a single word.”

“No, you will!”

“To heck I won’t.”

“More than that. You will abandon your thousand-year-old mill and hurl yourself into the garden beds. You will cultivate this grass and praise God besides.”

“Wait,” Mas bellowed. “I’m tired of praising God for everything—for being born, for food, for water, and for the fact that I’m alive. I’ve had enough of it. In return for that much praise, God could have covered me from head to foot with gold, not flour.”

“What a man!” Saat thrashed his arms. “Are you trying to get me riled?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe what?”

“Get you riled.”

“Listen Matamey,” Saat requested, “You’d better arbitrate. It’s impossible to talk to him.”

At that moment, ahead loomed the little store of the geranium state farm. It looked so tidy under the canopy of weeping willows that the flaring tempers of the two men suddenly subsided. There was nothing to arbitrate any more apart from the empty flow of words which Matamey knew so well. From his own experience and from the experience of relatives.

7

Their guess was right—the store carried almost everything needed to convince one that this was the age tens of thousands of years removed from pithecanthropus. The three men passed a critical eye over the wooden shelves well stocked with displays of Moroccan sardines, Greek butter cookies, Murmansk cod, Iceland fillet, Pacific herring and sundries of this sort of food.

“I could eat buffalo cheese,” Saat went into a reverie.

“Cheese?”

“Naturally. Our own, Abkhazian.”

The salesman, one Eugen Chizmaa, made no reply. A trade graduate, just starting in this business, he was thin looking, that is, neither fat nor lean, the typical meritorious counterman, an artist by his own right. Glum-faced, shifty-eyed, he gave the impression of being busy doing something illegal,

something one ought to be ashamed of. Finally, in reply to the janitor's question, he mumbled something.

"I can't hear you," Saat said.

The other two travelers picked something from the foreign selection in addition to a bottle of Abkhazian wine and took it out to a shaded place not far from the store door. For a while Saat stained to extract from the salesman a kind word or at least a smile—in vain. Admitting failure, he joined his friends outside.

After a manly lunch, a meal that lasted exactly the time required for three cans of meat and two kilos of bread to be transposed to three stomachs, the men were ready to set out again.

"Eugen," Matamey returned to the store, "did you by any chance see the principal of our school?"

"No."

"They say he was walking up this road."

"He hasn't been here."

"He was on his way up to the mountains, they say."

"I don't know."

"You mean you haven't heard anything about it?"

"About what?"

"About that he was seen on this road."

"No."

Matamey tried to inject some humor into the conversation. "When are you getting in Abkhaz cheese?" he asked.

"There's none here."

"But when is it going to be here?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe your joint will some day be trading with *churek.* Can you imagine, *churek* and cheese? What a combination!"

"No."

"No what?"

"I don't understand."

"Do I talk in a way you don't understand?"

"Yes."

Matamey pitied the man—no sense of humor! What makes a man like that enter the services of Mercury? Fortune-hunting? Hardly—none here. So what then? A desire to do good? What good? So what then? This Abkhazian sphynx in the image of a salesman named Eugen Chizmaa defied understanding—he seemed more enigmatic than the Egyptian sphynx. There he was, staring at the counter, in total oblivion of everything around him. Matamey left without saying goodbye.

"Have you ever seen an owl in a tree hole?" Mas asked him when he joined the others.

No, the secretary of the village Soviet had never seen an owl in a tree-hole though he had seen once a stuffed owl in the Sukhumi museum.

"Too bad," the miller shook his head. "You're a country man, yet unacquainted with owls."

"But I'm acquainted with papers, stacks and stacks of them," Matamey replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

"They're alive too," the janitor added.

"And hot," Matamey completed the sentence.

"Watch out that your soul doesn't change into a paper," the miller warned.

"I can't vouch for that, after all I am a pen-pusher."

They walked on in silence, quickening their steps. The miller, his face as grim as the hour before a storm, thought about the grindstones, about those marvelous creations of the human mind that turned tiny grains into flour. If one were to observe nature through the eyes of a wise man, he'd see life as grindstones and man as a tiny grain. What a pity that Andrey turned out to be one of those tiny grains. What a pity! This search might go on into infinity—searching for one man in the mountains was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The atavistic spirit spoke up in the janitor. In the fashion of his ancestors he began to spin a yarn of happenings far in the past with one sole purpose in mind: to kill traveling time. Matamey paid no heed. "The prince came and stopped at the door," Saat narrated. "Shall I call the owner and have myself invited or pass by unnoticed, the prince asked himself. The prince didn't want people to think he was furtive."

"And why not?" Matamey asked without thinking.

"Quite simple. Because a prince is a prince," Saat replied.

“Prince? What prince? What are you talking about?” Matamey couldn’t hide his annoyance.

“Can’t you see,” the janitor explained. “I’m telling a story of the far past.”

“What for?”

“To kill time.”

“What for?”

“What do you mean what for?”

“Why kill time?”

Saat decided that the young official was so preoccupied with Andrey that he couldn’t think straight. “Matamey,” he asked, “maybe we should sing a little marching song.”

“No. It’s best to walk in silence,” Matamey objected. “Especially on a Sunday. Hell, I was planning something for today.”

“Shame, Matamey,” the janitor chided. “Poor Andrey is in trouble and you’re doing some planning.”

“Why couldn’t he wait till tomorrow to disappear?”

“He couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Such thoughts come to a man only on holidays,” Saat said. “On workdays people don’t have the time to busy their minds with rubbish.”

“So help me, he’s right,” Mas let himself be heard. “A man potters only from too much fat or too much leisure. If he’d toil like an ant and carry bags of flour, his head wouldn’t be cluttered with junk.”

“What if Andrey is not pottering but is really sick?” Saat questioned.

“Make him plow two acres of soil and that’ll cure him,” Mas advised.

“I’d give a million to be transported on wings to my vegetable garden,” Saat expressed the wish.

“Listen, Mas, how well do you know this road?” Matamey wanted to know.

“Like my five fingers,” the miller replied, pointing at the sharp stones jutting out of the road dust.

“Where does it lead, to Suipsara?”

“Yes. And farther up no cars ever go either.”

The road coiled under a huge rock that seemed to have suddenly grown out from the fog. A reddish boulder it was, rising about fifty meters straight up. Behind the rock the road began to climb, crawling and twisting so tortuously that the travelers had to stop several times to catch their breath. At last they reached the level of the top of the rock. The view of a valley unfolded from there, and farther away loomed chains of white-capped mountains to which this path lead. Matamey was infatuated with the scenery. He wistfully admitted to himself that he'd never seen such beauty. Mas, apparently preoccupied with his thoughts about the two grindstones and the two bags of grain, didn't express any emotion. Saat saw nothing interesting since he had no double-barrelled rifle and these were hunting grounds, not a vegetable garden.

"No one here as far as I can see," the miller determined after scanning the scenery.

"And who's there under that tree?" Matamey asked.

No more than a hundred paces from them lay what looked like a man or might have been a barked log of wood.

"A man," Matamey confirmed.

"Looks like a log to me," Saat quipped.

"Some people look like logs," Mas muttered. "Let's walk up another hundred paces instead of quibbling."

They filed through amid blackberry bushes forming a narrow corridor along an overhanging cliff wall to their left.

"Ho, ho," the janitor exclaimed, looking up. "What a fall. I don't wish it on anybody." He greedily eyed the blackberries resembling miniature grapes. They looked delectable!

"You're not a goat, Saat," the miller warned. "Stop ogling those berries. Wait till we've found Andrey then you can stuff yourself as much as you want."

"All right, all right," Saat growled. Still he managed to snatch a handful of berries without slackening his pace—just like a goat.

8

No, it wasn't Andrey—merely a shepherd who had lain down and dozed off. He rubbed his eyes, apologized for some reason, and got up. He was a

tall babe, about twenty-five, blue-eyed, red-haired, dressed in a worn-out military uniform. The boy cast a searching glance for his herd and having found it at the clearing, felt visibly relieved. About fifteen obviously poor milk-cows of the small-sized Abkhazian variety meekly grazed in the succulent grass.

"I was looking up at the sky and fell asleep," the shepherd said apologetically.

"At the sky?" Matamey queried.

"Right there," the shepherd stuck his finger at the sky.

"Why at the sky?"

"Where else? Everybody is a stargazer nowadays. Why not me?"

"Why not indeed," Saat agreed.

"Maybe you'd like to fly in a rocket?" the miller sullenly investigated.

"And why not?" the shepherd flashed a freckle-faced smile. "I'd love to. Just think, to live in the twentieth century and not to fly a rocket!"

"You see?" the miller addressed Saat.

"I can't see what a chap like him would do in a rocket," Saat said. "I'd rather he knew how much milk each of his cows gave."

"That's no secret," the shepherd took no offense. "Each one of them gives full five litres. Per day."

Saat groaned with laughter—quite impolitely to be sure. "Five litres, imagine! That's what a good goat gives. A goat climbing rocks and nibbling on dry leaves! All right, maybe a little less. … But a cow!! If a cow gives no more than five litres it should be sent to slaughter."

"Why slaughter?" the shepherd angrily puffed up his cheeks.

"Very simple," Saat lectured. "Because a cow is made to give milk and not to potter. And a good shepherd might also be of some help here. That is if he stops admiring the skies and looks instead at the grass, at the cows' rumps and such. Young man, stars are beautiful at night, but a man always needs cows—day *and* night. If there's no star he can turn on a wick lamp or make a campfire and admire it, but if there's no milk—water won't do. Do you understand, young man?"

"I understand things more complicated than that," the shepherd retorted. "I understand every word of it and that's just why I disagree with you. I see no sense in life without the sky or the stars. The earth and the sky—together. Do I make myself clear?"

Saat appraised his opponent from head to foot and came to the conclusion that he was facing an incorrigible dreamer. His pants in patches but his thoughts—in the skies.

Forewarned by his secretarial sense, Matamey realized that this contest could drag on—obviously both sides were too obstinate and opinionated: the janitor in his vegetable-plot element, the shepherd in his intergalactic spaces. What was needed was a Solomon's decision. "I think they're both right," he addressed Mas. "They both adhere, each in his own right, to a just viewpoint."

The miller nodded his head. He was absolutely uninterested in Saat's much less in the shepherd's viewpoint.

"We've come here to look for a man," Matamey smiled at the shepherd. "Would you know, perhaps, our school principal?"

"You mean Butba?" the shepherd asked.

"Yes, him!"

"I know him. He climbed this road an hour ago."

"An hour ago?" Matamey shouted out.

"Maybe even a little less."

"This means he's around here somewhere. Did he tell you anything?"

"Yeah, we've had a talk."

"About stars?" the janitor interposed.

"That's right."

"You hear, they talked about stars."

"Was he absentminded?" Matamey continued the inquiry.

"I wouldn't say that," the shepherd replied after some thought. "I'd say he was worried for some reason."

"What reason? Didn't he tell you?"

"He was telling me about velocities."

"What velocities?"

"Of carts, cars, trains … planes, rockets …"

"Didn't I tell you!" Saat proudly exclaimed.

"Didn't you tell me what?"

"Don't you remember, Matamey?"

"You see," the shepherd went on, "when we met he asked me, 'Would you like to travel to the stars?' And I said, 'Of course.' And that made him

very happy. ‘Come with me,’ he suggested.”

“Where to?” the miller asked.

The shepherd pointed toward the mountains.

“What for?”

The shepherd shrugged his shoulders. “If you ask me he wanted to see how the earth looks from above.”

“What a strange desire,” Saat blurted.

“Nothing strange in that, esteemed one,” the shepherd snapped back. “A man is not made to crawl like a worm, he ought to soar above the earth—like an eagle.”

What a fellow, Matamey marveled. He couldn’t help admiring the shepherd’s deep inner conviction, his dignity without cockiness.

“A man ought to discover the secret of the universe,” the shepherd continued. “He ought to explore the moon, Mars … He ought to discover how new stars are born. Isn’t all that worthy of interest? Isn’t that why cosmonauts and astronauts are going up into space? Recently a heavy sputnik has been orbited; it relayed a great deal of interesting information.”

“How do you know all that?” Saat asked distrustfully.

Instead of a reply the shepherd pulled out a little transistor radio from his traveling bag.

“Are you listening to this?” Saat smirked.

“Of course.”

“To this instead of to the birds?”

“If it’s all right with you, esteemed one,” the shepherd retorted, “yes. Instead of.” He turned on the radio and handed it to Saat. Out came the melody of a gay Abkhaz song.

“Ho, ho,” Saat voiced elation, twisting the radio in his hands. He had not been expecting to hear a gay Abkhaz song to come out of a little box no larger than a box of matches.

The miller spoke up. He believed the conversation between the school principal and this shepherd was to the point. “Isn’t that so?” he asked.

“It was,” the shepherd confirmed.

“Was he making sense?”

“Certainly,” the shepherd expressed amazement. “As much as you and I. That man was highly interesting and intelligent. He had told me about his

calculations, about his sleepless nights …”

“Poor Andrey,” the miller wailed.

“Just the opposite, esteemed one,” the shepherd assured him. “He was a very happy man. To be frank with you I envied him.”

“We’re wasting time,” Saat interrupted. “Instead of discouraging him from his crazy notion you chimed in with him. Let’s go.” The janitor hastily moved away.

Matamey took leave of the shepherd and, together with Mas, followed the janitor. The boy shrugged his shoulders and stretched out on the ground again. His stare fixed at the sky, the volume of the radio on his chest turned on, the body of the shepherd semed to be here on this sinful globe while his soul soared high in cosmic regions.

He was trying to forget the strange travelers. He had nothing in common with them.

9

The climb was slow and tedious. Matamey wheezed hard, although he was the youngest. Saat wondered why and came to the conclusion that it was because of too much paper work, too many conferences and too many heated speeches. One avoids that by gardening—after you’ve done some gardening you find it easy to climb slopes no matter how steep.

They had been walking for about an hour. The janitor was under the impression they were creeping right into the sky. Hell, that principal knew where to hide. How strange! Only about fifteen kilometers from the village and the wilderness here was inconceivable. Wherever you looked—virgin nature! Probably a breeding place for bisons. And every step took you higher and higher. The sun, incredibly hot, scorched you unbearably in the back of your head. You seemed to be swimming in hot water. And Matamey, he looked as if he was going to keel over any moment. Who the hell needed this idiotic chase? If a man wanted to go off his mind, he’d do it whether you watched him or not, and no matter how nobly hard you’d tried to help him.

Suddenly Matamey halted his fellow-travelers and pointed ahead. Saat and Mas strained their eyes. Was it real what they saw?

On the crest of the next boulder, one of many ungainly boulders that nature for some reason had wanted to accumulate here, sat a man. He

appeared to be either reading a book or writing on paper.

"I swear by God that's him," the janitor exclaimed. "Where there're papers or books there's Andrey Butba."

There was a brief consultation: to shout to him or get in closer and let Andrey notice them? It was decided not to draw his attention. He'll see us and decide for himself what he wants to do.

"How did he get up there?" Saat wondered.

"The path leads to the right of that rock."

"Much to the right."

"Isn't there another way?"

"Only for bisons," Saat said. "Let's say a prayer first before we start to climb," he tried to quip.

The miller suggested that they keep on straight and look for another approach farther on. Andrey couldn't have flown up there.

"Maybe we ought to take a little rest," Matamey suggested.

"To hell with rest," the janitor shouted, covering his head with a handkerchief and wiping off his sweat. "Let's get through with it."

He was seconded by the miller. Matamey had to succumb to the majority.

Shortly the path turned right into a small saddle. There was nothing left to do but start crawling to the left, along a stony slope not too abrupt for climbing.

"Follow me," the secretary took the initiative. "And please livelier."

Saat was grim. The miller was silent too. Matamey tried his darnedest best not to discredit himself in front of his seniors. Often he felt like lying down on the ground to catch his breath but kept pushing on.

Unexpectedly the travelers found themselves on the crest of a cliff, not far from Andrey Butba—literally a few steps from him. Andrey either hadn't heard them come or pretended he hadn't. There he was sitting like Pythagoras of old, drawing his "circles," not on the ground though, but on an ordinary piece of paper. He did not ask them "not to cross his circles." He simply nodded at them as if they had just come into his office. As if nothing had happened and he hadn't run off.

"Hello," Matamey simply greeted him.

"How are you," the principal simply answered.

The miller was less tactful. “What are you doing here, Andrey?” he asked angrily.

“Where?”

“Here. On this accursed rock.”

“Accursed, why?” the principal waved toward the breathtaking panorama unfolding from this vantage point and dominating many kilometers around. Valleys and green hills, grey mountains and snow-white crests, reddish boulders and blue rivers, a whole seemingly separate and independent world, a strange, unpopulated galaxy. The rich variety of hues and colors made the janitor dizzy. He stepped aside from the edge of the cliff where Andrey was sitting.

Andrey, a tall, handsome dark-haired man with dark hazel eyes, was dressed in light woolen breeches and a white pique shirt. “Why do you, esteemed Mas, call this rock ‘accursed’?” he asked in a respectful, unhurried tone of voice. “Has this rock offended you in any way?”

“Very much so,” Mas snapped back. “What are you doing here, I’m asking you?”

“I?”

“Yes, you.”

“What do you expect a free man to do?”

Mas jumped up, as if scalded with hot water. “A free man works and doesn’t potter around in some mountains.”

“Who is pottering around?”

“You are, I believe.”

Butba, however, did not take offense. “Mas,” he said calmly, “I respect your opinion. But I’d like to know on what basis you declare that I’m pottering around.”

“I believe what I see,” the miller muttered.

“No, that’s no proof, Mas. If you intend to criticize my actions or the way I’m thinking, please do so rationally. Empty accusations do nothing to enhance a man’s arguments if the people involved are serious people. You accuse me of pottering which is a serious accusation. I could reply to it in all seriousness if my opponent’s arguments were fully rationalized.”

“We’ve been looking for you all day. Three people looking for one man a whole day. Do you understand the meaning of this, Andrey?”

“No, I don’t. Today is Sunday and I may avail of myself anyway I please.”

“True, true,” the miller admitted. “But you’ve got no right to worry us.”

“Worry you? Why?”

“What do you mean why? There you go running off …”

“Do you consider the fact of my being here running off? It doesn’t concern anybody but me.”

The miller spat out. Saat decided it was his turn to enter into the conversation. “Andrey,” he said, “excuse me for addressing you by your first name. You are younger and therefore I take the liberty. Tomorrow they may seize you down in the village. What can we tell everybody?”

The janitor’s argument seemed to have hit the mark. The principal became pensive.

“Well, Saat,” he finally answered, “tell them that Bowba will teach mathematics.”

“Why Bowba?” wondered the secretary of the village Soviet.

“Why not,” Andrey replied. “And what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Have you taken a leave of absence or something? Or have you willfully decided to retire?”

“You’re guessing wrong, Matamey.”

“That’s not right, Andrey,” Saat resumed. “Why do you refuse to explain your conduct to us? I’d advise you to come home with us.”

“Home!” Butba repeated convincingly in all seriousness. “Home is a concept that can be stretched. In this cosmic age of ours Earth is home. I’d even say it is no more than a little house. So, I *am* home.”

“What do you mean you’re home?” Matamey demanded. “As the secretary of the village Soviet I officially order you to resume your duties.”

“I can’t,” Butba replied, raising his voice. “You may kill me but I won’t. Can’t you see, I’m crowded, cramped. I’m suffocating!”

“That’s all nonsense, Andrey,” Saat reasoned.

“Aren’t *you* crowded?” The principal asked with a smile. “Is it possible that *you* don’t have that suffocating closed-in feeling? We’ve been cheated, you and I. We’ve been misled into believing that we were born on a roomy planet but all we’ve got here is a spot the size of a ruble. Two steps from one end to the other. And you call this home?”

“A good home at that,” Matamey asserted.

“Wrong!” Butba exclaimed. “A tragic mistake! You’re living in a cell. You’ve acquiesced to that annihilating closed-in feeling while just next to you there’re vast spaces to be had.” His arm swept the sky, from horizon to horizon.

It’s useless to argue with him, Matamey thought.

He’s out of his mind, Mas told himself.

That man is finished, Saat decided.

“There’s no mystery here,” Butba stuck his papers under his opponents’ noses. “No more than half an hour to the east, west, north or south. Yet you’d like to remain on this miserable little globe. It’s sheer insult to a thinking man.”

It wasn’t apparent what it was that had possessed him—the faith of an apostle, self-confidence of a fanatic, or both?

“Andrey, you’ll come down now with us and we’ll finish the argument in school,” the miller suggested. “We’ve got to take him away from here by force,” he whispered to Matamey and Saat.

“What are you whispering about?” Butba asked in a threatening voice. “Kindly leave me in peace. I feel much better here than down there below. A lot more air to breathe here.”

The miller took a step forward.

“Don’t you dare,” Andrey shouted. “Don’t you dare come closer.”

Poor man, Andrey! Matamey was the first to withdraw. The others followed his example. What came next was a tedious, purposeless siege—Butba, however, was always on the alert, watchfully eyeing each of his three adversaries. Although his means of retreat were cut off, he showed no desire to surrender. They sensed it. He looked like a mountain buck driven into a corner.

“Please come down from that rock,” the miller pleaded. “If you want me to, I’ll beg you on my knees.”

“Have dignity for your gray hair, Mas.”

“If you want we’ll all beg on our knees.”

“You better leave. If you like that cell of yours, that’s your business. Had you come for me with a flying rocket, I’d have gone with you. But you have nothing to offer other than your tiny globe full of people swarming like ants …”

“Yes, we have something to offer,” the janitor coaxed. “A magnificent supper with wine.”

Butba deprecatingly waved his arm. “Don’t disturb me,” he suddenly shouted. “I’m preparing my annual balance sheet.”

The three travelers were dumbfounded. As twilight was moving in they had to decide on a course of action. Without delay! A lone man must not be left by himself in the mountains.

All three of them, their intentions obvious, moved in on the principal.

For a brief moment it appeared that Butba had given in. Abruptly, however, he darted up, set one foot over the rock, into the chasm. A little breeze could have blown him down. Another word and he might be gone. Saat cast a glimpse into the precipice shrouded with a light mist. He pointed his head and the others glanced too …

Butba’s eyes flashed like sunbeams. Those were the eyes of a man possessed, a man unbridled. It was amazing how he held his balance on the edge of the precipice!

The three travelers gave up. They stepped back—soundless, tight-lipped. “We have lost him,” Mas whispered.

They were gone. And Butba, he still stood on one foot, for a while held fast by the force of gravity.

10

The three men were stupefied. Just think, a man almost made a buck’s leap into the chasm right in front of their eyes. Was it all a delusion? Was it possible that the principal was now calmly sitting in his room, working on his calculations?

“I feel lousy,” the miller somehow recovered from the shock. “In heavens’ name, tell me it was all a bad dream.”

“I wish it were a dream.” The secretary of the village Soviet was completely crushed. As the representative of the authorities and at the same time a human being, he found his burden doubly heavy. “Saat,” he asked, “do you remember what the doctor told us this morning?”

“No, I don’t.”

“He called this sickness geophobia.”

“Is that fear?”

“Yes, fear of the planet; fear of Earth … It’s a new sickness.”

Saat felt sorry for the principal. He isn’t an inhabitant of this earth any more, he thought. But after all the exhausting experience Saat also felt ravenously hungry, as hungry as a winter wolf. He had to put something in his mouth, be it even a clump of earth, or he’d lose his mind. “I’m dying from hunger,” he voiced an elementary cry.

“How can you think of food at a moment like this?” Matamey asked.

“I can and I ought to,” Saat shouted. “I’m about to gnaw the bark off that tree.”

They descended lower and walked along the cliff edge. The only thoughts the janitor had were about food. His hunger pangs were so strong that he chewed up a few leaves. “If we hurry,” he said, “we may be able to forage some berries. It’s not too far from here. I marked the place in my mind.”

“Let’s go.” They moved down faster, as fast as it was possible to lumber down on the narrow path winding between stones and bushes.

“Please, wake me up,” the miller moaned. “We couldn’t have seen the last of Andrey. Isn’t it possible, perhaps, that a man may fly and still be rational? Please, isn’t it?” He was almost in tears. Were it not for Saat, he’d have punched himself in his forehead.

“What are you trying to do to yourself?” the janitor scolded. “Take pity on your poor head. It’s not your fault—the man was incurably sick. Better ask me or my woman, or the doctor who explained the sickness to us. It’s like this, a man grows out of his diapers, so to say, feels drawn to the sun, moon and all those damn spots, and instead of digging in the garden like me, he starts to climb walls. It’s not your fault, or Matamey’s or mine.”

“We ought to save him,” Mas implored.

“Impossible!” Saat was positive. “Don’t you see, there’s no cure for it. Writing numbers on papers is one thing, but trying to jump off a rock—that’s something else.”

“I can see that too,” Mas wailed. “But listen, maybe he’s really preparing his annual balance sheet?”

Matamey spread his arms.

“And I tell you a man is born to the earth,” the janitor insisted. “He’s bound to it by a navel cord and whoever tries to cut it will end where

Andrey did. A few more steps and I'll treat you all to nice berries. I'm dying from hunger."

Saat walked ahead, followed by Mas and Matamey. The setting sun was in their eyes, lying in long stalk-like shades of yellow on each leave, each pebble, and each grain of sand.

I hope we meet that shepherd boy again, Saat thought. He might have something to chew. He, too, is a little queer, not a bad fellow, though. A picture of health! No doubt keeps a nice supply of food on hand. A few berries in the meantime won't hurt. "Stop!" he suddenly roared out, as if he were leading a whole regiment. "Stop and look to your right. Ought one pass by that berry clump?"

"One ought," Mas decided.

"One should," Matamey seconded.

"You oddballs," Saat remonstrated. "Wait a minute and I'll treat you. A man alive needs food. Kindly arm yourselves with patience." The janitor pressed his chest against the thorny bush and fearlessly reached for the berries. He brought out a handful.

The miller categorically refused. He couldn't get down a swallow, he said. Matamey tried a few.

Saat kept forcing himself against the pricky bushes like a fearless he-goat, stuffing in his mouth berries almost with their stems, stilling his hunger like an animal. Mas and Matamey still overcome by disbelief paid him no attention. "Maybe Andrey will soar into the very heaven like an angel and repeat the evangelical miracle," the miller said. "No, I don't believe it, I don't believe," he added. Matamey felt depressed by guilt: he shouldn't have let down a human being, especially a sick one.

"Have you had enough," he called out to the janitor.

"Oh, those berries, they're delicious," the janitor's response came back from amid the greenery. "Black and ripe, simply out of this world! First I'll fill my belly full, then I'l cram my pockets full and then, so you see, we might stay here an hour and maybe two …"

"What shall we do?" Mas pulled Matamey aside. They needed and couldn't do without each other.

"Let's get away from here. I can't look at that glutton. He won't stop until he bursts."

"And leave Andrey on that rock?"

“What can we do?” Mas rubbed his forehead. “He won’t listen to us.”

Matamey shrugged his shoulders. He still had no idea what explanation they were going to give to the people in the village. Something, no doubt, would have to be said.

To say nothing, was not possible.

1961

One Too Many

by Yuri Kachayev

Yuri Grigoryevitch Kachayev, born in 1937, graduated from the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow in 1959. Taught English for several years before working as the manager of the literary department of the magazine Pioner. *His works include,* In The White, White April *(1963),* In The Open Sea, *(1966) and other books for children.*

He had a good, strong name: Prokhor. But as far as Vadim was concerned it had a prehistoric ring to it; to Rita it had the sound of an approaching storm.

"I'm Prokhor Zarubin," he had said, pulling down the tent flap behind him as he came in.

"Have you brought the theodolite?" Rita asked.

"I did. Also some chow."

"Thank God. We've been sitting here for three days, doing nothing. They put us down here and told us to wait …"

"We'll start today," Prokhor said, taking off his maroon tarpaulin windbreaker and tossing it into a corner. "You've fixed yourselves nicely, I see. Only too much grass—it makes the place too humid, and that's what attracts mosquitoes."

"He knows everything," Vadim shook his head suspiciously.

Prokhor glowered at him for a few seconds but made no reply.

"So you'll be the third one," Rita smiled.

"That's right, Rita. You don't like it?" Prokhor asked.

"No, on the contrary," she said.

“You don’t address strangers by their first names,” Vadim stated pompously.

“You’re a grouch,” Prokhor laughed, getting up. “I’ll come back later.”

“ ‘No, on the contrary,’ “ Vadim scoffingly imitated Rita after Prokhor left. “You better stop that funny business.”

“Why?” she asked. “He’s cute, and discreet, too. Not like you.”

“How can one be discreet here,” Vadim growled. “Haven’t had a good night’s sleep since we came. That beastly cold in the mornings, and those mosquitoes! And this is supposed to be summer!”

“You’ll get used to it, darling. It’s always hard at the beginning,” Rita moved closer and embraced Vadim’s neck. “Don’t be angry,” she whispered. “Kiss me.”

Not waiting for him, she closed her eyes and kissed his hard, stubborn lips.

A branch crackled outside next to the tent and Prokhor’s gay voice announced, “All right, people. Come out, you hear? No first names this time.”

When Vadim and Rita came clambering out of the tent, Prokhor stood at a huge heap of thick-needled silver fir twigs. Later, while the two of them threw the grass out of the tent, replacing it with the aromatic needle litter, he drove two piles into the ground, brought a kettle of water, and made the fire. With hungry eyes they watched him pry open a can of meat with an axe, their mouths watering for a change of menu after three days of nothing but “concentrates.”

Afterwards they gulped spoonfuls of the piping-hot meat broth straight from the kettle, leaving the noodles for the end. Following the meal Vadim relaxed, and the hard look in his eyes softened. “Here,” he offered Prokhor a cigarette. “A Moscovite! Only a few left.”

Prokhor hungrily drew in several puffs before throwing away the cigarette and crushing it with his heel. “Well, as they say, since everybody’s full, drunk, and up to his nose in smoke, it’s time to do some work,” he announced. “Here’s the general task—by the third of August we have to clear a roadway up to the eighty-sixth kilometer. The order starting tomorrow is this: reveille at four o’clock in the morning; from twelve to sixteen when the swelter’s the hottest we break off for dinner. Quitting time

is at eight in the evening, and we'll take turns in making breakfasts, dinners and suppers."

"What are you proposing, a twenty-hour work day?" Vadim asked, without looking up at Prokhor.

Prokhor hitched his shoulders. "We're short on people. We have to double up."

"And pay?"

"Pay's also double."

The finished route ended near the tent. It was a narrow, thin slice of a roadway in a dark ocean of woods along which steel posts of high-voltage lines would extend toward the north several months from now.

On the way Prokhor cut up a bunch of thin birch stakes and gave them to Vadim. Then he began to set up the theodolite in the clearing, turning the eyepiece, trying to get a correct fixation from the last two stakes set up by their predecessors. The extreme stake had been driven into a small, smoothly rounded post, darkened by the rains while its whittlings, smelling moist and moldy, had yellowed and teemed with minute ants the size of tobacco grains.

"Take the axe and saw and go ahead," Prokhor ordered Vadim and Rita, lifting his face from the eyepiece. "When I raise my arm you drive in the stake. That shrubbery in the way of the track will have to be shaved off."

The first real obstacle in Vadim and Rita's way was an old pine tree on which somebody had left a tin funnel for the sap. The hewing guide notches were wide and sprawling, like the feathers of a giant arrow. Vadim craned his neck and gave a dejected whistle. Then he sighed and made ready with the axe. But whether from trying too hard or from lack of experience, he couldn't make any headway.

"May I try?" Rita asked, feeling sorry for him.

He glowered at her with eyes red from anger and kept up his travails. Prokhor was getting impatient and walked up to watch them. Angered by his stare, Rita shouted at him in a thin, unfeigned voice, "You get away from here. Nobody asked your help."

"Phew, you crazy?" Prokhor reeled back in surprise. "I haven't come to laugh at you. Give it to me," he stepped up to Vadim. "You grip the end of the handle like this," he showed. "Then you get an honest blow. The blade must enter the wood at an angle, like this. You understand?"

Vadim's perspired, flushed face turned a deeper red. "Come on, forget your pride," Prokhor told him amicably. "Nobody's born a master, you know …" With a few short accurate swings of the ax he bit into the pine tree and reached for the saw. "Grab an end, fella," he ordered Vadim.

The saw cut softly into the wood, almost as noiselessly as if it were cutting butter. Five minutes later the tree began to sway, gave a painful groan, and thudded onto the ground, sweeping under a young birch with its body.

"A-a-a-outch!" A late echo shouted back in fright.

"See, that's all there's to it," Prokhor said, getting up onto the stump and examining the tree. "Too bad such a beautiful tree's going to rot. Ten steres of wood easy!"

2

The first few days they had good luck. Their track ran groves, cowslips, and perennial plant growth. The sky above them was a deep blue, oscillating from the swelter. Under their feet unseen bumble bees buzzed like bass strings of guitars. Work was easy and gay, hardly a tree to fell, hardly a stake to set. In the evenings as they took measure of the track they had covered, Vadim would smile and wink at Prokhor—another kilometer plus, and every hundred meters extra meant a few extra rubles.

However, in another week the track ran into an overgrown silver fir thicket. Prokhor picked up his old Berdan rifle and went ahead to scout the terrain. He took a long time, and when he came back he was all scratched and grim. His hair, wiry like the autumn feather grass and tangled with needles, was matted from the sweat into a weird shade of green. Without uttering a word he took the canteen of water and drank. He finished drinking and still there was general silence.

"Have you at least reached the end of it?" Vadim asked.

"Green hell, no," Prokhor wiped his lips with the palm of his hand. "The same all over, fall on your knees and cry. But crying, my friends, we shall leave for some other time. Right, Rita Margarita?"

"But why ask me, Prokhor?" the girl looked at him with a puzzlesome expression.

"I'm asking you because you'll have it the toughest. But I've a bright idea: what if I let you handle the theodolite?"

“Me?” Rita asked. “But I don’t know a thing about it.”

“You’ll learn. It’s not such a complicated science.”

Vadim wanted to say they didn’t need any favors. On second thought he decided not to say anything—that guy might think he was jealous. Jealousy! He wouldn’t admit this feeling even to himself. Whenever Prokhor got into a conversation with Rita he’d pretend indifference. But he was a poor actor—his face would draw out and tension would be written all over it. Then something else: the jealousy was intensified by envy. He envied Prokhor’s unhurried, confident airs, his agility, even his walk—the light, sprightly gait of a taiga man. True, he too had some assets: a strikingly handsome appearance, the southern swarthy kind of attraction that even men noticed. Then his sphere of knowledge—it was much wider than Prokhor’s. Prokhor, for instance, in all seriousness considered Surikoff to be one of the greatest world painters. How couldn’t he help but scoff at that homegrown Siberian patriot! Besides, how valid can be the opinions of a man who judges art by the color of postcards!

Vadim’s reflections were interrupted by a question: “Well, don’t you intend to pack up and go home now?” It was Prokhor who had asked it.

“Home?” Vadim’s heart ached. His home was Moscow, and if it hadn’t been for Rita he’d have never come here. She had wanted to have a romantic experience … A romantic experience! Never enough sleep, blood blisters on your hands, and an aching feeling all over your body in the mornings. Hell only knows what you eat, and that stupid tent … drag it almost every morning from one place to another.

They got up and began walking toward the tent. Vadim walked behind Rita, absentmindedly brushing away twigs that got into his eyes. Prokhor had a strange smile on his face. “You know what, kids,” he said, as they approached the tent, “we have a reason to celebrate. Today is my birthday.”

“You are serious?” Rita asked.

Prokhor nodded. After poking in his knapsack for a moment he hauled out a bottle.

“Spirits! That’s the thing,” Vadim cheered, although he never really cared for sheer spirits.

While Rita fussed with the fire, trying to make supper, Prokhor brought an armful of bird cherries with over-ripe stalks but otherwise quite appetizing. “Are we going to water it down or what?” he wanted to know.

“Why bother?” Vadim suggested bravely. The bottle was put on the home-made table, next to a kettle of buckwheat groat, a can of fish, fruit juice, and three enamelled cups. Prokhor dispensed the spirit but diluted Rita’s with the juice.

“To everybody’s success,” Prokhor raised his cup.

“To success!”

They gulped down the drinks. Vadim gasped for breath, his chest was aflame. For a minute he sat with his mouth open, tears running down his cheeks. “Have a chaser, you kook,” Prokhor offered him a cherry stalk. Vadim grabbed the juice jar instead. And then, a short time later, he and Rita intoned some songs while Prokhor lay at the fire and listened, his head resting on his elbows. Those were strange songs, Moscow songs. They stirred up in Prokhor a vague feeling, a longing for unknown towns, for distant lands, and for the sea which he had never seen:

On Gogol Boulevard,

Maple leaves’re fla-a-ying high.

And over city roofs,

Clouds are hanging day and na-a-ight,

Rains and janitors,

Keep chasing boys and girls,

To whom nothing matters but their la-a-ove.

Vadim and Rita’s faces were sad as they sang. They’re homesick, Prokhor thought. He, too, could visualize the boulevard covered with heaps of fallen leaves and in between them the wet glitter of the asphalt. There was an autumn nip in the air and crowds of people were milling around.

“I feel like dancing now,” Rita sighed. “I miss dancing … Boys, can you think up a grand ballroom, all in multicolored lights, a parquet floor and music? Doesn’t it all seem as unreasonable as a rainbow now?”

Prokhor gave a shiver. He stared at her.

“What hit you?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” he blushed and looked down at his feet. “There’s a place we could dance … in the village.”

“Sure,” Vadim scoffed. “They have a parquet floor and colored lights, and …”

“You’re still a grouch,” Rita said, rising from the ground. “I’m going to change,” she addressed Prokhor as she entered the tent. A short time later she came out, dressed in a bright cotton print dress with short sleeves. He noticed for the first time how attractively supple she was.

3

The village with the affectionately odd name Petenka was about five kilometers from the track. People were in demand in Petenka, especially fellows. Because fellows are like free birds—they want to study, or work in a factory, or in construction—away they go and that’s the last you’ve seen of them in Petenka.

Petenka used to have a booming sable industry. But when for some strange reason the animal world had migrated farther north and the hunting had lost its lure, that industry had petered out. Crop-growing was never good in Petenka. So now only old folks and unmarried women stayed, living on mushrooms, berries, nuts, or raising figs. But young women were only too anxious to migrate to town. The village had been slowly emptying; more than half of its cottages were barred by boards, and the three rows of inhabited cottages presented a glum picture.

No wonder then that all of Petenka was more than happy when three strangers showed up in front of its club. There was many an ouch and gasp as each of the unmarried young women who had been clinging to the windowpanes made a headlong dash for her best holiday dress put away in the chest. Half an hour later a marveling, naphthaline-smelling Petenka congregated in front of the club, having delegated Vas’ka Khromoff, its accordion player and chatterbox, to introduce himself to the visitors and then the visitors to Petenka.

The dances began, Vas’ka did his best to make his accordion weep sorrowfully or giggle hysterically. Little kids, wide-eyed and full of wonder, had come to watch but their presence was not desired. “Too stuffy anyway without you,” they were unceremoniously ushered out, and a smack on the behind added for remembrance.

Rita danced with abandon—the quadrille, the “Little Pine,” the “Sabbath Jig,” dances she had never heard of in Moscow. But this evening had turned out to be such an extraordinary, happy affair, everything went so smoothly … that she could sense her partner’s every move. And her partner, Prokhor, was such a good teacher! Vadim watched them from his seat in the corner, the usual ironic smile playing on his handsome face.

During intermissions the girls would surround them in a tight circle.

“Where do you work?” one asked.

“You live in a tent? Day and night?”

“Could you use us in your work?”

Prokhor took pains in answering minutely every question. Any girl who wanted to study geodesics had his approval. “That’s right, girls,” he told them. “No sense turning into sour pickles here. Beauties like you are hard to come by no matter where.”

Not until midnight did the dance begin to break up. To the accompaniment of Vas’ka’s accordion, Rita walked away with her arm in Vadim’s. Her face stood out in the dark in a fine, hazy outline. Only rarely did she turn her head to have a glance at Prokhor and when she did her eyes had a gleam of apprehension. It seemed she had wanted to ask him something but dared not.

A bunch of girls came running by. Vadim followed them with his eyes, then suddenly asked, “You’re a monk or something? Look how many cuties and you do nothing but flap your ears.”

“There’re cuties everywhere,” Prokhor replied in a bored tone of voice.

“Oh, I see. You only go for the beauties. But if you listen to me you’ll be better off with just a cutie,” Vadim advised. “When you are with a beautiful girl you only tend to make a fool of yourself. You waste your good time trying to make love heavenly. But if she is just cute, she has no swollen head and makes life easier for you.”

“You’ve had your say, that’s enough,” Prokhor said, slowing down a little. “And don’t you talk about beauty. You’ve never seen it and you never will.”

“And why not?”

“Because you can’t see it by looking at it with the eyes of a gadfly,” Rita interjected.

Vadim stopped and abruptly removed his hand from her arm. “Already in cahoots, you two. All right, to hell with you,” he snapped, walking away, almost running ahead, and soon disappearing in the darkness.

“Look out, don’t get lost,” Prokhor shouted after him. Then after a moment of silence he asked Rita, “Is he always such a psycho?”

“I wouldn’t call him a psycho,” she said. “Just selfish. Especially since he wasn’t accepted at the university. It’s hard to accept failure when they keep telling you for years that you’re better and smarter than the rest. Some time ago he began to drink so his mother decided a trip would do him some good.”

“And you were made his wet nurse?”

“Poppycock,” Rita replied angrily. “I flunked out too. For almost a year I did nothing but loaf. It got me down. Without qualifications it’s even hard to get a cleaning woman’s job in a factory. I’m not the lucky type.”

Prokhor had a mind to ask her why she was making up a story about herself. He didn’t, though. She had apparently forgotten, he thought, about the written-in acknowledgment in Lugovski’s book of poems she had lent him. “To Margarita Smolentseva,” it said, “for her ardent participation in the amateur circle.” And beneath the inscription there was the clearly legible stamp of the Bauman Institute.

They had been walking along a soft forest lane before turning into a path. It was so dark that they kept stumbling against naked tree roots, until the moon rolled out and the birches began to reflect its cool gleam. When they reached the clearings, and waded knee-deep in foggy vapors, Prokhor thought of a fairy tale river whose shores were made of yogurt.

4

Each morning brought with it a new round of tortures. After a short night’s sleep that barely relieved the previous day’s fatigue, it was time to crawl out of the sleeping bags and start a new cooking fire. For the second week the wind had been blowing from the east, bringing with it swarms of gnats, spiders, mosquitoes and wood lice. The lice were the worst—they were so tiny that no horsehair net or chemicals could keep them away. The wood lice found their way up the sleeves, behind the collars, into the boots, then dug into the skin. They fearlessly crept into the fire or smoke, and

barely was a spoon lifted to the mouth without a flat insect body floating in it.

"Vitamins," Prokhor quipped glumly. "Something like black caviar."

That would be at breakfast times. At work it was even worse. Breathing behind mosquito face masks was hard. Toward evening the clothes were soaked with perspiration, and after drying they squeaked like frost-stiffened laundry.

No more than two hundred meters of track could be cleared in a day. When the earnings for the week were totaled, there was barely enough for food. In addition, Vadim badly chafed his foot. One morning Prokhor took a look at his painfully twisted face and said, "You know what, fella, you better take a rest for a few days. We'll somehow manage without you."

For the first time Prokhor went to work alone with Rita. A warm drizzle had been coming down since early morning, the sky was overcast, and an intoxicating aroma of marsh tea stood in the air. Prokhor worked with a mechanical aloofness, taking a deep breath, heaving a blow with the axe (the only tool he used as the thicket was thinning out), then making a step forward … Another step, and the same all over again.

The morning progressed. The drizzle became mixed in with pricky needles, and the marsh tea aroma turned into a nauseating, dizzying odor. A sticky sweat filmed his eyes and blood hummed in his ears. A dull stupor took hold of his body, filling his heart with hate toward all those grey, wet stems that stood like a blinding screen between this murk and the bright world ahead.

Around noon they decided to work through dinner with only a little time out for a breather, then call it quits earlier in the evening. Sitting at the smoking fire, Prokhor reflected aloud how they'd get out to the village on Saturday and heat up the bath house.

"I never washed in a village bath house," Rita confessed. "It must be fun."

"A bath house's a bath house," Prokhor opined, "whether in town or in a village."

"Have you often been to town?" she asked.

"I do even now—from time to time, when I have to pass my exam in Krasnoyarsk."

“My, you’re so secretive,” Rita shook her head reproachfully. “You never told me you did some studying. At the Institute?”

“Yeah. At the Forest Institute.” He felt a little embarrassed, as if he had offended her. “You know,” he said, trying to change the subject, “this winter I’ll make sure to go to Moscow. I’ve promised myself already. If I do I’ll come to see you, you mind?”

Prokhor’s face became serious, through his eyes still smiled. Rita wasn’t sure if he had meant it in earnest or not. “You may come,” she almost whispered, dropping her head.

It was still light when they started on their way back to the tent. Prokhor, who had been walking ahead of Rita, suddenly made such an abrupt stop that she bumped her nose into his back. She wondered why he had stopped, then peeking over his shoulder, she saw Vadim—apparently coming to meet them. Vadim walked across the clearing, bending quite often, straightening up, chucking back his head like a rooster, and spilling a string of berries from his open hand to his open mouth.

Probably blackberries, Rita thought flatly, the cowberries aren’t ripe yet—as if it were of the utmost importance to establish what kind of berries Vadim was eating. It took her almost a whole minute to become aware of a really important factor: Vadim wasn’t limping at all. He ambled with the easy gait of a man who had had a good rest. He was even whistling a happy tune.

Then Vadim saw them. His tune stopped in the middle of a bar, his face contorted into the familiar mask of pain. “You’re early today. I … I thought,” he smirked sheepishly before unclenching his fist and showing them a handful of blackberries.

“Yes, we’re early to-day,” Prokhor stated slowly. “Well … Let’s have supper.”

They ate in silence. The supper was endless, the silence was oppressive. Finally Rita couldn’t stand it any longer and ran off into the tent. Prokhor took his rifle from behind the table and walked toward the woods.

“Wait,” Vadim called out.

“What do you want?”

“I’ve got to talk to you,” Vadim caught up with him and walked alongside. They crossed the clearing and plunged into a thinly grown deciduous forest. Prokhor walked ahead, dragging his feet, stumbling often

on anthills and dried-up fallen trees, raising a pungent, yellow dust. Only after some time, as if he suddenly remembered that Vadim was behind him, he stopped.

"What's the talk going to be about?" he asked, turning around to face Vadim.

"It's not more than once that I … well, stepped the wrong way," Vadim said, without raising his eyes.

"This is no time for words, Vadim. I think you'd better go."

"Where to?" Vadim didn't understand at first.

"You just go away."

Vadim paled. "I see," he said, twisting his mouth. "You want to have Ritka all for yourself. What a fox you've turned out to be. But let me tell you something, you roan." Vadim made a step closer. "Haven't you been looking for a pure beauty? Well, what do you say to this? Ritka's no beauty, she's cute all right, you understand? You can get from her what you want without as much as an ouch."

"Swine!" Prokhor called with a dreary calm. "You miserable swine!"

Vadim knew a fist into his face would come next if he didn't get out of the way. He jumped aside and ran to the road. He wanted to stop and call from there some nasty, obscene name but was afraid Prokhor might take off his rifle and take a shot at him. Stumbling on tussocks and jerking from helpless rage, he kept walking toward the village.

Prokhor pressed his cheek to an asp and closed his eyes. He stood there for a long time, listening to the beats of his heart. Then he got himself a smoke, hunched his back, as if wanting to become smaller, and walked toward the tent.

Rita was sitting on an empty box, crying.

"Get your things," Prokhor told her gently, touching her shoulder. "He's gone."

"I hate him," she shouted, bursting into loud sobs.

"No, you love him," he said, "and he's your responsibility." What an idiot I am, he thought, trying to talk her into going. Why? I don't want her to go.

Rita rose meekly, tossed her things into the knapsack, changed and walked up to him. "That's it, Prokhor," she said. "If you want it this way …" her lips trembled as she tried to form a smile.

Prokhor had to look aside. Then taking her hand into his palms, he told her, “So long, Rita-Margarita. If you think it over. Well … you know yourself what I mean.”

He walked with her to the road, then stood there, watching her blithe, fair figure until she disappeared behind the turn. “She won’t come back,” he uttered to himself. “She surely won’t come back …”

1965

The Golden Month

by Nazir Safarov

Nazir Safarov, a meritorious member of arts of the Uzbek SSR, was born in 1905, and began his literary activity in 1930. Published a collection of feature stories, Fellow-Countrymen, *in 1958 and plays in 1961.*

It isn't easy to talk about your own wife. It isn't easy for a man to speak evil of any woman for that matter. We have a saying: a *jigeet* who divulges a secret about his beloved ceases to be a *jigeet.* That's why I don't talk. That is, I *didn't* talk. Now I can't keep quiet anymore. I just can't.

See for yourself the kind of predicament my wife has put me in by her actions. And what actions! Had it all been about trifles, say a family quarrel, when jars are being broken and a bowlful of soup is spilled on the husband's head, one could still stand it. You can restore peace by buying a new jar or cooking another potful of soup. But my situation is quite different, my plight is hopeless. There can be no talk of peace; I am in for a war, a war for life or death. That's why I've got to tell my wife, "It's either I or …"

But not right away. In order to understand my despair you'd have to follow my story from the start. And the start coincides with that very day I saw Altin-Oy in our office. I saw her and fell in love with her.

Why did I fall in love with her? This, too, isn't something a *jigeet* should be talking about. Besides anybody who knows Altin-Oy will understand and won't wonder why.

Altin-Oy's eyes are capable of conquering any youth. They're round like ripe plums but darker. But that's not all. They glow. When the morning mist is blown off the plums, they sparkle with the beauty of the sun; and when mysterious shadows are cast by her long eyelashes, you have an enchanting play of light and darkness. Oh, Altin-Oy's eyes are capable of touching the most hidden strings of the heart and making it resound in song. It wouldn't surprise me if my flute that hangs quietly on the wall broke out some day in a song of love for Altin-Oy. But even her eyes don't tell the whole story. The story of Altin-Oy lies somewhere else. Having fallen in love with her, I became like the nightingale of the poem that cried because of a proud rose. I cried. It's true my tears were silent; they were the tears of a self-respecting man who was past the turmoils of youth. After all, I was thirty-two and an accountant. I'd sigh. But my sighs were silent, too, because I didn't want to disturb the peace of other self-respecting men working with me. Yet whenever Altin-Oy entered the room, my heart would numb from ecstatic admiration and slip away into feelinglessness. It might have even stopped beating. You can imagine my torments.

Still, I wasn't the only one who suffered. There were others, like our mechanic Rassoul, the foreman Karim, who pined for Altin-Oy, and even our senior agronomist Egrash-Aka would lose his equanimity, blush, and talk softly whenever she'd come in view. I was seeing everything from behind my desk; I'd click the beads of my counting abacus and keep an alert eye on the agronomist. He'd not only redden, this Egrash-Aka, but he'd constantly praise Altin-Oy, marvel at her exploits, and each time he addressed the village folks he'd start by mentioning her name. Maybe he didn't have her eyes in mind at those times, probably not, her work-team was famous throughout the district for the record crops it harvested, and this enhanced Egrash-Aka's prestige. He was a man who knew whom to like and on which side the sun rose. And Altin-Oy's sunrays were bright enough to cast some fame on the whole *kolkhoz.*

Nevertheless, it wasn't Egrash-Aka who conquered Altin-Oy's heart. It was I at whom she peered with her dark, plum-ripe eyes and smiled. She smiled at me and everybody knew that this proud girl had chosen me, the most reticent and modest of them all. Modesty—quite an asset, it's something that people appreciate.

It was then that I said to Altin-Oy in a low voice, "Please have a look at this, Esteemed Heroine (she hadn't been a Heroine of Labor yet but I was

anticipating events as I showed her the statement of her summer labor achievements). “Here, Highly Esteemed, are the numbers which make a man’s soul rejoice.”

She took a look at the statement, and why not? That statement revealed a treasure of five hundred labdays! Altin-Oy’s face beamed, and her eyes, as I was quick to notice, were full of gratitude. Yes, that had been a wonderful day! Happiness had descended upon me on the wings of spring, as poets say, although deep fall was outside. I didn’t see statements anymore; they transformed into a book of poems and each word sang praise to Altin-Oy.

That was how the month of my happiness, the month of my hopes, had started. In honor of Altin-Oy I called it the Golden Month. How else could one name the birth of a man’s love? There is no other word for it.

My choice had the highest approval of all of my kin. “You may consider yourself the sheik whom God has blessed with eternal happiness,” my sister said to me. Grampa Suleiman-Bobo, the eldest and wisest man in our tribe, praised my bride-to-be. “You won’t find a better girl than her in the whole world,” he said. “She works for two, thinks for three, and is responsible for ten” (the number of women in her work team).

Our *kolkhoz* chairman spread his arms in astonishment. “Do you know what kind of person you’re bringing into your house?” he asked. “She’s the Heroine of tomorrow, a delegate to the district Soviet, the foremost worker of our *kolkhoz”*

A person who has luck has it all the way. I knew how lucky I was and tried to keep my heart from leaping out from joy. There wasn’t a poet in the world who’d have known how to express my élan. I wasn’t crying like that nightingale about the proud rose, I sang.

What was I singing about? I was singing about what was waiting for me —bliss, happiness, love. I sang and sang. My song would begin at dawn, when the girls set out into the fields led by the incomparable Altin-Oy. Being modest by nature I’d be singing in a soft voice, and I doubt if my beloved had heard the lofty metaphors which embellished my every stanza, but did it matter? She knew the depth of my emotions, anyway. In the evening, no sooner did the sun sink than my song would rise anew. Later in the evening I’d meet Altin-Oy on the bank of our village creek and here we’d dream of our future to the music of the whispering waters and the rustling wind. I’d praise her eyes that gazed at me with tenderness, I’d praise her hands that were tireless in their toil, and she’d laugh out and tell

me in reply, “If you keep praising me too much I’ll forget the goal I’m striving for.”

“What is your goal, my Esteemed?” I inquired.

“That is a secret.”

I don’t like secrets. I’m frightened by anything that is not clear or comprehensible. Isn’t it better to know one’s intentions? Whenever I have a blank sheet of paper in front of me I’m anxious to put a number on it, to make everything clear and understood. ‘So tell me your secret,” I’d insist, not without some apprehension.

“Some day you’ll find out,” Altin-Oy would laugh.

It is easy to say “someday you’ll find out.” A man’s patience isn’t so great as some people think. I urged Altin-Oy, insisted, because how else should a man act when his beloved is hiding something from him?

The month was about over, my Golden Month was coming to an end, and so was my patience. I couldn’t stand the suspense any longer. While sitting in the office I’d not have the patience to be checking on documents, the abacus beads would be dashing out from under my finger in the wrong direction, so in the end I demanded of Altin-Oy, “You ought to uncover your secret to me, my Esteemed, you ought to do it immediately.”

“All right,” Altin-Oy unexpectedly agreed. “Since you are so anxious, please wait a little longer. Tomorrow my secret will be revealed.” So said my beloved and she laughed gaily.

I felt no desire for laughter. I tried to suppress my impatience; after all, another twenty-four hours of waiting would be no calamity. One more number, so what, there are many months in the year. We’ll make believe November has thirty-one days. The heart won’t mind a violation of this kind and science will not quarrel.

I acquiesced. Wretched me, little did I know what was in store for me! It might have been better if that November didn’t have thirty-one days. My song came to an end. It came to an end that night as I was waiting at the wicket for Altin-Oy to return home.

It was a long wait. My anguish was shared by Altin-Oy’s old mother, the patiently wise Moucarram-Bibi. Of course, a man is not eager for the company of a grey, toothless, hunched woman, but what can he do when everybody considers him her son-in-law? In any case, even there I showed my typical modesty and reticence, although Moucarram-Bibi didn’t

appreciate those qualities and kept pelting me with questions, trying to soften me with numerous “ouches,” sighs, and I-told-you-so’s. There was no need to I-told-you-so me. Her daughter and my wife had gone to a board meeting of the Disexecom at five in the morning and hadn’t returned as yet, long after midnight, as the roosters had already had their first crow, and the morning sky had peeked out from behind the horizon. Could a loving heart remain restful? No. And yet I told Moucarram-Bibi; “Really, Mother, you’ve got no reason to worry. Altin-Oy will be home soon.”

“Eh,” she reminded me, “you’ve told me this ten times before and she isn’t home yet. Instead of trying to coddle me with empty words you’d better start walking up to the Kishlak House to meet the truck. You don’t think they might let her walk home, do you? There aren’t many girls in the whole district who could light a candle to my daughter.”

I had thought of going to meet the truck but was it fitting for a respectful man, the accountant of the *kolkhoz,* to be running along a *kishlak* street and stare into the darkness at every passing pick-up truck? Hence, I politely told the old woman, “True, Altin-Oy is the most unique girl in the district, they’ll no doubt give her a lift home.”

As they say, a mother’s thoughts revolve around her prodigal son and the thoughts of the son revolve around his own business. As she peered from behind my shoulder, straining her tearful, feeble eyes, Moucarram-Bibi thought of all kinds of dangers lurking in the narrow alley among rows of young trees. Yet what can one see on such a dark night except thousands of stars in the sky? And while my mother-in-law worried about her daughter, I was concerned about the secret my beloved was hiding from me. What will she say when she sees me? She may even be a Heroine by now. If so, a great happiness is awaiting us. Anticipating the taste of joy, I tapped the old woman’s shoulder. “Our worries, mother, will soon be rewarded,” I assured her. “I’m convinced that Altin-Oy is going to bring us good news.”

My mother-in-law had no time to reply when a harried patter of feet came from the alley and the next moment Altin-Oy’s bright kerchief burst out of the deep shadows. She dashed up to her mother. “Oh, Mom dear,” she shouted with tears of joy in her voice, “I’m so sorry for making you worry, but please I had an exceptional day today. Days like this don’t come without anxieties.”

“Pray to God that He doesn’t create slaves in the form of mothers,” Moucarram-Bibi replied, hugging her daughter’s head to her chest. “This is

what mothers are for, what's there to forgive? You stayed late, you probably had to. I'm only concerned about one thing: no matter where you are, just be healthy and wealthy."

While mother and daughter exchanged pleasantries I stood there, burning with impatience. What was her secret? I wanted to know. Since Altin-Oy had said it was an "exceptional day," I was sure something important had been decided at the board meeting. "All is well that ends well," I said trustfully. "Let's go inside and listen to what dear Altin-Oy has to say."

"Yes, yes, let's go," the old woman chimed in." The *ploff* has very likely overcooked."

"Oh, Mother," Altin-Oy fluttered her arms in annoyance. "You haven't eaten supper on account of me. I don't like it."

I tried to calm my beloved. "What's supper, nothing. I'd be willing to fast three days if it made you happy."

Naturally, my beloved's reply was a gracious smile followed by a look of affection as warm as that first look in the office. I was sure her eyes glowed with pure love for me.

A while later, as the savory aroma of the *ploff* wafted in from the table, I asked Altin-Oy, "My Esteemed, have you achieved the goal you have been striving at? Isn't it time to reveal your secret?"

She blushed with the color of the reddest tulips. "Today I've made the most momentous step in my life, and yet my soul feels light. I've acted according to the voice of my heart."

"I know," I said joyously. "You've taken upon yourself a new obligation, the right move toward receiving the title of Heroine. The tallest mountain won't stop you now, my Esteemed."

A shade of apprehension overcast Altin-Oy's face. After a moment's thought she said, "The path to any peak is difficult. If one starts climbing from a valley it is even more difficult."

"Allow me to give you a helping hand, my Esteemed," I said. "She who is already on the mountain needs no more than to make the last step."

Moucarram-Bibi understood the wisdom of my words in spite of her senility. "He's right," she said. "The person who has covered ninety-nine steps is closer to making the hundredth than the person who has only opened the wicket to go out into the road."

"I have opened the wicket tonight," Altin-Oy declared.

I found nothing better to do but laugh out at my beloved's joke although my heart was stabbed by a dire premonition. What kind of a strange talk is she leading into, I wondered? I don't care for foggy expressions. Isn't it the time to put a distinct number on the sheet, I asked myself? So I said: "Altin-Oy, please stop teasing us; tell us what your secret is."

"All right, I'll tell you," she said.

It would have been better had she not told us. What I heard made my hair rise from fright. I don't know how I managed to bring the spoonful of *ploff* into my mouth. My hand trembled, my lips quivered.

"I've left my work team," Altin-Oy announced.

"You left it?" the old woman groaned. "What do you mean you left it?"

"That's not all," Altin-Oy resumed.

"That's not all?" the old woman interrupted. "Heavens, she abandons the most famous team in the district and that's not all!"

"I'm taking on Rozya Karimova's team …"

That was all I could take. I couldn't swallow my spoonful of *ploff,* a lump of rice got stuck in my throat, and the lovely, radiant picture of a Heroine which I had envisioned in my dreams withered in an instant. With it withered the number 500 for 500 labdays which I had projected onto the ledger sheet.

"Why've you become so quiet?" Altin-Oy wanted to know. "Don't you like what I've done?"

Moucarram-Bibi and I had been gaping with our mouths open. I didn't know how the old woman felt, but myself, I had lost my tongue. What a scandalous folly! To switch from the top team to the most backward, impoverished and shame-ridden team in the district! That hapless Rozya Karimova had never been able to collect more than thirty tons of cotton per acre. What a poor joke! And Altin-Oy wants to know if we like what she has done!

"Esteemed, you can't be serious," I finally succeeded in stammering out. "You're trying to play a game with us, aren't you?"

"I'm serious," Altin-Oy assured us. "Quite serious. All delegates including our *kolkhoz* chairman have approved of my request."

"What about the minutes of the meeting?" I asked, clutching at the last straw. "Maybe …"

"Everything is a matter of record now," Altin-Oy stated in hard voice.

Ay, wretched me! And I had been hoping, dreaming I'd be a Heroine's husband. Everything came to naught! "Oh, well," I mumbled a crestfallen utterance. "What can you do, life has strange things happen to you sometimes."

"Not happen to you," Altin-Oy corrected me. "I *made* them come to me."

When the inevitable is upon us, and there is no more hope left, the philosopher within arises to pronounce wise truths in an extraterrestial voice. I must have sounded like him when I declared, "Our tongue is made to utter all kinds of words. Once it has said 'yes' it can also say 'no.' "

Altin-Oy smiled. Her smile kindled a ray of hope in my heart, but, alas, it was premature.

"A tongue is no cow's tail," she replied, "to be wagging in all directions chasing flies. Aren't we supposed to be thinking things over before moving our tongues?"

What did she mean? Was she referring to my philosophy? It worried me. Still, my natural modesty took the upper hand, my lips sealed up.

"You're right," the old woman reasoned. "You've got to think before you talk. A tongue's not to be wagged like a cow's tail."

My mother-in-law clearly had swung to her daughter's side. There was no doubt in my mind that the two of them were going to advance on me now in a united front. But I was wrong this time.

"You're right, too," Moucarram-Bibi glanced at me, "a tongue can say 'yes' and can say 'no,' too."

The old woman hasn't lost her wit yet, I thought. Her reason encouraged me. Now the two of us are going to move in on Altin-Oy. But there was to be no battle. Altin-Oy jumped up from the table.

"Mom dear," she said, "I've always listened to your advice, when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no.' Thank you for your supper. I've got to get up early tomorrow; the chairman and I have to leave for the fields."

Modesty! How many times did it leave me in the lurch? Now see, it stopped me from uttering the decisive words. I had to leave without having had my say.

Won't the reader challenge me on this: Why was I leaving my mother-in-law's house? I suppose he will. But let me tell him that everything has a

reason and all the reasons will be given later. The story of my love being unusual, it contains many mysterious pages.

"A *jigeet* who loves a girl ought to understand her," Altin-Oy told me on parting. "You ought to do the same."

I see, she wants me to understand her. I her, but she me—no. A respectable man, an accountant, a *kolkhoz* V.I.P. next to the chairman ought to subject his convictions to a woman's fancies? Doesn't she demand a little too much, my Altin-Oy? Sure I love her, but ….

"So long," I uttered sadly, trudging away into the darkness.

Yes, it was dark, everything had become dark as far as I was concerned. The whole world, the stars, not even mentioning the sun. Because the sun will not rise on me anymore. Some man full of enthusiasm once said, "Love makes one blind." He was wrong. When I loved, everything around me was full of brilliance, now in my bitterness everything looks black. Not even a single ray of light ahead of me.

The next morning I couldn't make out any ledger entry. I signed documents without looking at them. A crime? Yes, it was a crime. For the first time in my life did my hands move with mechanical aimlessness, without sense, although there might have been a mass of significance in the papers. I was lucky, though, because there were no dishonest people around me.

About ten in the morning I could stand it no longer. I said to the cashier, "I think I better go out and check on the stacks of hay we have on hand." In fact, I never cared much about hay, least of all that day. What I wanted was to see Altin-Oy.

She wasn't in her old section. There were only a few tractors ploughing the fall fallow. As I might have expected from a stubborn person, Altin-Oy had risen at dawn and taken over Rozya's work team. All the girls were cleaning up cotton stubble and two *jigeets* were carting fertilizer.

Stop! I wanted to shout. Instead I moaned softly. Too late, there was Altin-Oy running her new job at full steam. There was no retreat for her now. She waved her kerchief at me, inviting me closer. What for? A meeting of two people with no joy between them is like a day without sunshine.

"See," she called out, "we're on our way up." Yes, there they were, just starting. She could have been at her goal by now. How cruel! Did she realize how much pain she caused me with these inane words? Nobody ever

rose to any heights from this field. Who else but me should know the most about this team after five years of keeping its accounts?

I decided to ride by pretending I wasn't the least interested in Altin-Oy or her girls. "I'm in a hurry," I said. "I've come to check on the hay."

"Why have you become worried about hay so early in the morning?" Altin-Oy laughed. "Besides, the stacks are way yonder."

The other girls had laughed, too; young people always like to bare their teeth. Youth don't know yet the meaning of hurt pride. To them life is light and simple, a holiday. That's why I frowned when I retorted, "Like some people I too have got it into my head to reach what I want in a roundabout way."

Altin-Oy had stopped laughing; my barb had apparently hit a sore spot. "People of courage don't take the roundabout way but the difficult one," she parried my blow. "They are not both the same."

Sharp was my beloved's tongue. A duel with her was spiked with dangers. What was there to do? I spurred my horse and started trotting away. On the trot I managed to have my last word: "People of courage storm to victory and don't fence themselves off from it with hurdles. This is where the truth lies, My Esteemed."

Thus we parted. That is, I rode away and she stayed on her miserable field.

As you may guess, my love was not permitted to bloom luxuriously under such conditions. It felt smothered. In order to save it I made one more attempt, trying to talk reason into Altin-Oy. I decided to ask our agronomist's advice, especially since I saw him coming in my direction. "Dear Egrash-Aka," I asked him frankly, "please stop Altin-Oy from her irrational act. Instead of glory, which has been right on the threshold of our *kolkhoz,* we are going to garner ridicule."

Our horses stood side by side and I was able to see every feature on Egrash-Aka's face. After I had spoken, it seemed to have changed, the edges of his moustache had pulled up and a rosy blush had spread on his cheeks.

"Poor fellow," he devastatingly shook his head. "I sincerely sympathize with you. With a wife like that you'll never have peace."

He was right. Peace was out of the question. By her reckless actions Altin-Oy was capable of aggravating any man. Although I had considered

Egrash-Aka a rival, I felt compelled to express to him my thanks for his comments. “So why don’t you help me?” I implored.

Here again his face seemed to have transformed. It became pale, the edges of the moustache dropped. “No,” he said waveringly, “I cannot help you.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t ask, please.”

Losers are always poor sports and will always try to take revenge for their defeats in love. I decided to ram it right into Egrash-Aka’s throat. “Do you love Altin-Oy?” I demanded.

Again he blushed deeply. “In the first place because of that, and in the second …”

I bristled. What could the second be? Did he, too, have the intention of becoming Moucarram-Bibi’s son-in-law? How insidious can a rival be?

“… and in the second place,” Egrash-Aka continued, “I wholly approve of her remarkable step.”

So that was where the catch was! So that was where the heart-poisoning venom came from! Now was my turn to do some face-changing. I changed so visibly that Egrash-Aka became frightened. “Don’t you feel well, Esteemed?” he mumbled. “Hadn’t you better dismount?”

“No!”

Only the horse could help me. I spurred it and galloped away into the *kishlak.* I had to think of something fast if I wanted to save my happiness.

The mechanic Rassoul was riding out in my direction. I stopped in my hustle and addressed him, completely forgetting that he, too, was my rival. “Do something, pal,” I pleaded. “Let’s save a human being. We are losing our best team leader, and with it we are bungling away our only candidacy for a Heroine. Altin-Oy is on the brink of a precipice.”

First Rassoul had opened his eyes wide in fear, but when he guessed what I was talking about he began to laugh. He laughed with such gusto that his whole body shook and even the horse under him quivered. Rassoul was the biggest man in the *kishlak,* sizewise and weightwise; even our large office door was too narrow and low for him. His horse had to be the strongest animal in the *kolkhoz,* even so it had trouble carrying him. Only a tractor never broke under his weight and that’s probably why he became a mechanic.

“Ha, ha, ha,” Rassoul gasped from laughing. People began to look back and watch us, some astonished, some curious.

“What strikes you so funny?” I asked after glaring at him for a while. “A human being is about to go down in shame and you’re bursting from happiness. You better help me do something to save Altin-Oy from being pushed down to her degradation while there’s still time.”

But Rassoul laughed and laughed. Finally he choked out the words: “That’s me, didn’t you know?”

“What’s you?”

“I’m the one who has been pushing her. …”

I was panic-stricken. Everybody, it seemed, was in collusion to send Altin-Oy to her doom and deprive me of my happiness. How terrible my rivals’ revenge turned out to be! I could listen no more to Rassoul. I took off, hoping to find salvation somewhere else. It was my bitter fate, however, to drain the cup of sorrow to the bottom. As I reached the office I heard someone call my name.

It was Karim, a team leader. “Congratulations, congratulations,” he exclaimed joyously, as if it were my birthday and he was about to raise a toast in my honor. “Altin-Oy’s act radiates welfare on you, too. …”

It was obvious, Karim was making fun of me. This rival of mine had chosen the most diabolical way of revenge, praising my dishonor. But friends, I thought, you’re celebrating too soon. The respectable *kolkhoz* accountant is not licked yet. He is going to have the last laugh on you.

I waved Karim away. He was too young to merit my attention. Let him first grow a moustache and become a crew steward at least before he has the audacity to address mature people.

I galloped by the office, by Karim, toward the house of my mother-in-law. She was my last hope. If she doesn’t understand me nobody will, I thought.

“Where’s the fire?” the old woman swung her skinny arms as my horse came to an abrupt halt at the wicket. “Don’t keep me in suspense, talk fast!”

“Where’s the fire,” I repeated in her pitch of voice, “as if you don’t know yourself where the fire is. Where did Altin-Oy go this morning?”

“What do you mean where? Into the field, where else?”

“Into which field?” I asked.

“Rozya’s. …”

I sighed gravely. The old woman didn't understand the danger hanging over her house. "You know what kind of field that is?" I said. "Apart from crabgrass nothing ever grows there. They call it luck if a cluster of cotton crops up here and there. They sow hope and harvest tears. And her team—each girl is lazier than the next, they do nothing but eat pancakes and drink tea the whole day."

"Oy, boy," the old woman wailed. "So why did she go there?"

"That's exactly what I'd like to know, why? A person who isn't about to commit suicide doesn't put a rope around her neck."

Moucarram-Bibi wiped tears off her face. "You're right, son of mine," she whispered. "Why does our Altin-Oy need a rope? She's young and pretty, we've got light and welfare in our home. Why should she run from good to bad?"

"So why don't you stop her?" I urged. "You're her mother, and a mother's word ought to be a daughter's law."

"Yeah, yeah," the old woman agreed. "If a child errs it's her mother's duty to straighten her out. Don't worry, Sonny, I'll bring Altin-Oy back to her senses."

I wouldn't be truthful in saying that my mother-in-law's words flooded my heart with serenity; still, a germ of hope did sprout in it. I thanked the old woman and went back to the office—there was work to be done. Love is love but ledger sheets are ledger sheets. If Altin-Oy was going to collect tears instead of cotton in her section, to whom will it behoove to support her? At least my labdays will have to suffice to maintain our home.

I could hardly wait till evening. Once more the familiar wicket, once more the shuffling of rubbers on the walk. "Son of mine," my mother-in-law groaned as she let me into the yard, "you were right. A person who isn't about to commit suicide must not tighten a noose around her neck. But … Altin-Oy is right too. She's not thinking of any rope; have a talk with her yourself."

So. My last ally had capitulated. My mother-in-law, as was expected from any mother-in-law, had sold out her son-in-law. Oh, justice, how blind thou art! I'm alone, alone with nowhere to go!

My feet dragged reluctantly along the path leading to the house. Never before had that path appeared so long and tiring. No! I couldn't reach the

end of it. “I better wait here,” I told the old woman. “Let Altin-Oy come out onto the terrace.”

My mother-in-law nodded and went inside. A minute later the gleam of a silken kerchief stroked my eyes and Altin-Oy noiselessly floated down to me. She felt nimble, my beloved, her hand touched my shoulder. “Please, don’t be angry with me,” she whispered.

Altin-Oy knew how to say things to make your head swim. But I remained cold and stern. “When a man’s head is hit by a stone,” I said, “he doesn’t think of his disheveled hair. Our happiness is at stake.”

We walked out into the orchard and sat down with our backs against the wind on a cool stone bench strewn with fallen leaves. I talked, Altin-Oy listened. I carefully presented to her all my doubts, all my anguish and fear that had accumulated during that worrisome day. “Now, it’s your decision,” I concluded.

As I finished there was silence for a few minutes. Then Altin-Oy whisked off with her hand a bunch of leaves, as if trying to brush away my arguments, and said, “You’ve weighed the labdays, but you haven’t weighed my feelings. You just don’t understand me.”

That was the limit! Who in the family is supposed to understand whom, a man his wife or a wife her husband? Besides, who is the more mature, the more experienced, and the more farsighted? Who is she to know? So I knocked my fist on the bench, almost breaking a bone, and uttered the same phrase with which I had opened my story, “It is either I or …”

Once again there was a long pause, during which I’d managed to count almost all the stars in the sky. Then I heard Altin-Oy’s soft, soft voice, “All right, have it your way …”

At last! At last reason has triumphed! Happiness has returned to me, love will be allowed to bloom and prosper again. I wanted to kiss my beloved when I noticed tears in her eyes. “My dearest, why the tears?” I asked.

“I’m so afraid,” she whispered.

“Why? I’m right beside you.”

“But you’re going to leave. …”

“Why should I?”

Altin-Oy sighed. “Because I’ve chosen the other ‘or,’ “ she said sadly.

I couldn’t believe my ears. Did Altin-Oy reject me?! Oh, what gratitude!

Hurt, anger, hate—all of it rose in me at the same time. “Goodbye,” I shouted and broke away from that house which had suddenly become a strange place for me.

* * *

It isn’t easy to talk about your own wife. It isn’t easy for a man to talk evil of any woman for that matter. There is a saying. … Oh, this is not the time for sayings. My wife! Sure you’ll ask me, why do you say “wife?” Your story doesn’t show it, does it? Why have you told so many strange things, why, for instance have you run away from your wife’s home? Wait a moment, when I tell you that Altin-Oy wasn’t my wife then, you’ll see things falling into their places. But what about now, you’ll ask?

Now? My natural modesty makes it hard for me to say this word aloud. She *is* my wife. Almost the whole *kolkhoz* was at our wedding. … Many people came even from the neighboring *kishlak.* Everybody was congratulating me, everybody. … Only Egrash-Aka wasn’t. “Poor, poor man,” he said to me. “With a wife like her you’ll never have peace.”

He was right, Egrash-Aka. I know of no peace. Altin-Oy hasn’t stopped vying, advancing, hustling toward her new peak. And I? I’m jittery, nervous, mad. But I don’t say anything. …

After all, I love Altin-Oy. …

1964

Little Whale, the Painter of Reality

by Vassily Aksenov

Biographical information not available.

“What did you bring?” Whale asked me.

“Nothing, just a cap.”

“Let me see it.”

He took my new leather cap and began to study it curiously. In a matter of seconds his curiosity reached such intensity that he began to tremble. “Tolya, what is it?” he shouted.

“It’s a special kind of cap,” I muttered.

“A cap you put on to fly?” he asked louder, jumping up with the cap in his hands.

I picked him up on that idea. “Yes, to fly. With this cap you and I will fly to the North Pole.”

“Hoorah! To the white bears?”

“Uh, huh.”

“And the seals?”

“Yeah, and the seals.”

“And who else?”

My head was still buzzing from a full day’s work in the course of which I had managed to get into a few arguments with office associates and smart from the manager’s tongue-lashing. My mood was nasty-nasty. Yet, I made an effort to conjure up the scant fauna of the Arctic Ocean.

“Also to the sharks,” I tried to bluff.

“No, it isn’t true,” he objected heatedly. “There’re no sharks there. Sharks are bad, and all Arctic animals are good.”

“You know, you’re right,” I hastily agreed. “All right, you and I will fly to the white bears, the seals, and the … ah …”

“Whales,” he cued.

“Yeah, the whales. And what else?”

“The limpeduses,” he shouted with enthusiasm.

“What is a limpeduse?”

My question stumped him. He lay the cap on the couch, moved away to a far corner of the room and from there came a whisper, “It’s a … an animal.”

“Oh, I see. How could I forget. Of course, a limpeduse! Such a slippery, little animal, of course!”

“No,” Whale confidently disagreed. “It’s big and furry.”

My wife entered the room. “Let’s go and do our business, Whale,” she ordered.

They left together but then the wife returned. “Did you call him?” she asked.

“Call who?”

“Don’t play dumb. The whole day you found no time to call him?”

“All right. I’ll call him right away.”

She left, and for the first time today I was alone. It felt blissful to listen to the beautiful silence, like taking a bath or a shower, a shower of solitude after a whole day’s work filled to its brim with noisy people, friends and strangers.

I sat at the empty desk and laid my hands on it. It was good to feel its cool blank surface devoid of any folders or papers, serving now only as a support for my heavy hands.

Outside the window the sun had noiselessly overcome the yellow thicket of the nearby orchard and was rolling toward the corner of a many-storied building, a gigantic, towering six-sided prism which was still dark, seemingly lifeless.

In the yard, on the room of the boiler room a gang of ten year olds was causing a pandemonium. From their wide-open mouths I could guess the clamor behind the window.

A nice little old woman traipsed cautiously from the front garden, as timidly as a doe, and turned toward the boiler room. The youngsters began dropping down from the roof.

The old woman had been the object of their mischievous pranks every evening, as soon as she'd come out into the yard to breathe some fresh air and set her wizened seat on an inflated rubber cushion. She had become used to them, however, and bore with patience the merrymaking of those quick, uncannily cruel "yard terrorists," as she called them. She was patient though fearful, always fearful.

And now, as the boys shot a jet of water from the yard hose across her path, amusing themselves by guffawing and leaping, she patiently stepped from foot to foot and waited for them to get tired of their game. Unexpectedly, her friend, the janitor's wife, came to her rescue; her mouth wide open, her arms waving wildly, she attacked the boys.

This scene, full of sound as it must have been, would have normally aroused in me anger and sorrow. But now it passed by my indifferent eyes like a silent movie.

In the end the old woman safely crossed the yard while the "terrorists" returned to their infernal activities on the boiler room roof, probably not giving a thought to the possibility that if she died their souls might be invaded by their first, even if short-lived, feeling of emptiness.

Trying to maintain my indifference and the life-saving lassitude, I pulled up the telephone and dialed that damned number. I tried to make believe that I didn't care, that calling him meant nothing to me; still, on the third digit I suddenly had a sinking feeling inside, my heart, liver, spleen, everything suddenly clustered into a crazily-tangled lump … and then the busy signal saved me.

I envisioned him sitting on a chair, or lying on the couch, undoubtedly playing with his glasses, swirling them on one finger and chatting over the phone. With whom? Sadovnikov? Voynovski? Ovsyanikov? I swore. And at that moment I heard Whale's yelp from the kitchen. He seemed to be running amuck. Sometimes he does just that.

"Go away!" he screamed at the top of his voice. "Go away," he screamed at my wife, "we don't need you."

Next came the wife's excitable voice and then the click of the light switch. Certain punitive measures had been applied. Whale was left alone in

the dark kitchen. He quieted immediately.

The wife stalked into the bedroom and buried herself in a corner. They were getting her down, those squabbles with Whale, our tiny Tom Thumb, our little little-over-three-year-old sonny boy.

I got up and thudded toward the kitchen, making merrily like a terrible elephant: "Trra-rra-rra. 'Phant-Dad is coming. Bimbo himself from the deep jungle. Trra-rra-rra. Himself. In person!" My heart was swept by a feeling of love and serenity.

Against the background of the dusking window I saw his round head. He was sitting on the potty, whispering to himself, raising a finger toward the window, and the first evening lights of the building across the street.

I'd become used to Whale. That strange sensation of an illusion I used to have when he'd break into the room or roll in on his tricycle was getting dimmer and dimmer. That mysterious reverence and the alarm of the first months of his life had almost disappeared. Now it was like this: well, there's Whale, and that's that. Little sonny boy, little hocus-pocus fish-whale sitting on the parapet, or playing and all that kind of stuff.

He was only six months old when I had nicknamed him Whale. Both my wife and I were bathing him in a little wash tub, as he was twisting in the soapy water, opening and closing his toothless mouth. I was holding his head, trying to keep the pieces of cotton in his ears from falling out. And he … he'd give me a blue-eyed glance and smile slyly, as if he had been foreseeing our present intricate relations. First he had looked like a sausage in a soup and I had said to my wife, "There he is, a little sausage."

Having thought for half a minute, my wife decided that the nickname was not esthetic. Then I had thought of another metaphor: "Whale."

The wife had made no reply.

That evening after we had bathed Whale I left for Vnukovo and got into a huge plane which took off for the Far East. Later, while traveling around Sakhalin's little port towns, as soon as I got into a hotel or a guest home I'd take out his snapshot and think of him just like this: "I wonder how my little Whale is today?"

Who could remember the number of nicknames I had given him after that? He was Nippie and Pottie and once his name was as complicated as Mushie-Plushie-Janglie-Banglie-Spoonie-Goonie—but all those nicknames had gradually faded away. Only one remained: "Whale."

“Well, what was all the fuss about?” I asked, sitting down beside him on a stool and getting myself a smoke.

“Look,” he said, pointing at the window. “Little fires. One, two, three, eighteen, eleven, nine,” he went on counting the lights. Then he shouted, “Look, there’s the moon.”

I turned to the window. A pale, frayed moon hung over the houses.

“Yeah, the moon,” I made a poor imitation of enthusiasm and shook the ashes on the floor.

“Tolya, there is the ashtray,” Whale shouted in my wife’s tone of voice.

“You’re right,” I said. “I beg your pardon.”

We lapsed into silence, both seated, he on his potty, I on my stool. The absoluteness of the silence was only disturbed by my wife’s sighs in the bedroom and the rustling of leaves of the book she was reading. Whale’s eyes shone with a mysterious light. The quietude was obviously to his liking.

“You know,” he suddenly stirred. “Gagarin is flying to the moon.”

“That’s right,” I agreed.

“You know,” he continued, “Gagarin, and Titov, and Tereshkova, and John Glenn …”

A long pensive silence. “What about them?” I prodded.

“… and Cooper … They don’t put anything in their mouth or nose,” he completed his thought.

The wife returned to the kitchen and picked him up from the potty.

“You haven’t done anything,” she scolded. “Sit down again and try. You’re absolutely not trying.”

“Tolya, are you trying when you sit on the potty?” Whale asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “Elephant Bimbo always tries.”

“And how about ’phantess Tumba?”

“She too.”

“And how about the little ’phant Clump?”

“Oh, how he tries!”

“And who else tries?”

“The sperm whale does.”

“Is the ’perm whale good?” Whale asked.

“Did you ring?” the wife asked.

“It was busy,” I said.

“So call again.”

“Listen,” I exploded. “It’s my business, isn’t it? It’s my business and I’ll call when I feel like it.”

“You’re a coward,” she said contemptuously.

I jumped up from the stool.

“Go for a walk, the both of you,” she said sharply. “Get ready and go.”

Whale and I left our house and went along an alley toward the boulevard. It was dark. Whale was walking with wide, energetic steps, his little hand firmly pressing mine.

“Well, how is it?” I asked.

“How is what?” he became confused.

“Is the sperm whale good or bad?”

“ ’course good. Sharks are bad, but the ’perm whale is good.”

I wondered how little Whale pictured the sea which he had never seen? How did he picture its depth and endlessness? How did he picture this city? What was Moscow to him? How little he knew! He didn’t know the difference between a city and a state, didn’t know that the world was split into two camps. He didn’t know what “world” meant. We’ve categorized so much already—good or bad, but we’ve categorized almost all phenomena, all our surroundings, we’ve constructed our real world, but he was still living in his marvelous, strange world which was so unlike ours.

“And who bit the moon’s side off?” he asked.

“Ursa Major,” I blurted out and regretted it immediately because I could anticipate the explaining I’d have to do next. From the trembling of his little hand I knew that curiosity was again the master of my little son.

“Tolya,” he inveigled. “What kind of ah … Ursa?”

I picked him up and pointed at the night sky. “You see those little stars? Those, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven which look like a scoop? That is Ursa Major or … the Great Bear.”

“And what are stars? And what’s the Great Bear? Why is it hanging like that forever and ever?” Whale mockingly threatened with his finger, “You, Great Bear, why did you bite the moon’s side off? Why, huh?”

His gaiety and his gullibility in this instance emboldened me. “And higher up there,” I said, “is the Little Bear. You see that little scoop? That’s

the Little Bear."

"And where's the Middle Bear?" Whale shot at me a reasonable question. He seemed to be trying to organize a bear family.

"The Middle Bear?" I mumbled. "Well …"

"Maybe in the woods?" he helped me out. "Hunting?"

"That's right. Of course, that's where it is."

I let him down and we walked out into the boulevard. All the benches were occupied by elderly people and nurses, rows of fourteen-year-old girls, and behind them rows of fifteen-year-old boys. A bluish light of luminescent lamps shone upon the Humped Pony—as big as a mammoth; on the Firebird—as tall as a giant turkey; on a huge Puss-in-Boots bigger than two people—with a vicious sneer on its round face; on another corrupt-looking cat tied by a golden chain to a wavy plywood seashore; on Prince Guido, Princess Swan, The Rocket, The Queen of Spades, Gulliver etc.

That was "The World of Phantasy," the juvenile book bazaar spread on our Boulevard. The stands were already closed, and only here and there a yellow light slithered through a crevice in a plywood fable giant, a sign that the vendors were counting their day's receipts.

Whale was bewildered. He couldn't move, didn't know where to run first —to the Puss, the Prince, or the Swan? For a few minutes he seemed to have forgotten the tongue in his mouth, kept rolling his large eyes, making soundless whispers. Then he tugged my hand, gave a squeal, and we both dashed off toward the stands. I had difficulty in fencing off a volley of questions, in telling him who belonged where, who was good and who was bad.

Apparently almost all the figures expressed the good and the light, folk wisdom and cunning, apart from the pitiable Vulture that swooped onto the Swan personifying the force of evil. But Guido's arrow was already taking care of that.

Finally my Whale got tired and leaned against Humped Pony.

"Let's go home, Whale," I said. "It's time."

"Tolya, you know what? Let's take them all with us."

"With us?" I asked. "How? They're too big."

"We can take them," he assured me. He slapped Pony, "There, he's ours." He ran to Puss and slapped it. "There, it's ours too."

He *took* all of them. And never even looked back. When we walked out of the boulevard he slowed down; I stopped too. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Look, Tolya,” he said. “There goes such a pretty auntie.”

I saw the “pretty auntie”; she was coming straight at us. Her walk reminded me of a discreet, or what shall I say, of a barely restrained dance. By thrusts of her gorgeous knees she was tossing aside the flaps of her gorgeous overcoat, and the parasol, incredibly thin and pointed which she carried under her arm, semed to be a spare extension of an inner pivot. Her eyes, mysterious and sly, lit up brightly the moment she saw us. I hadn’t seen this auntie for three days, and now I began to feel perturbed and alarmed, as always whenever I happened to see and think of her. Especially now with Whale around.

“Oh,” she said. “So that’s your little Whale. He’s cute.”

She bent down to him and let him touch her parasol. “What’s this?” he wanted to know. “An arrow? A gun?”

“It’s a parasol,” she exclaimed. A second, and the parasol sprang open. With a little snap it had canopied above her head, lending her figure an extra touch of an almost acrobatic agility.

“Let me hold it,” Whale pleaded.

She gave him the parasol. “It’s so nice to see you, Segnor,” she addressed me. “You look so peacefully busy.”

“I, too, am happy to espy you, Mademoiselle,” I said.

We could have dispensed with that idiotic quipping, the idiosyncracy of our set, and seriously broached the subject which had bothered us for the last few days. But as it was, it behooved us to show more or less a sense of humor of this sort and neither she nor I could do without it.

Whale was orbiting around the parasol. We could talk undisturbed.

“Why are you so sour?” she asked.

“Are you mad at me?”

“And you’re disgusted, right?”

“No, why should I be?” I said.

“You think I am a bother to you?”

“You have to be wily?”

She said she wasn’t wily, that we needn’t quarrel after not seeing each other for three days, that she understood why I had the jitters, she

understood everything and never let me out of her mind, which, maybe, helped me. …

She was and she wasn't lying. How easy sincerity and wile blend in a feminine heart, I thought. First serenity, then insane, disgusting vanity. Then they feel good, those beautiful dames, I thought. They are not afraid of death, never think of it; the only thing they are afraid is old age. How foolish of them to be afraid of old age.

While she was full of sympathy for me I was making up my mind not to re-enter her world—there wasn't enough of me for that. I thought of one thing which had nothing to do with adventures or amours—I yearned for serenity, the kind of serenity I felt among those plywood monsters of "The World of Phantasy."

"Honey," the pretty auntie said to me, "I understand how humiliating it must be, but you must find the courage to call him up. You ought to explain everything to him and even if you make it worse, it may still turn out better in the end. I'm sure of it."

She raised her arm and her palm touched my cheek. She stroked it. As she did Whale edged in between us. He tugged at the pretty auntie's sleeve.

"Hey, take your parasol and stop touching my daddy," he said. "He's *my* daddy, not yours."

We took leave from the pretty auntie and went home. For several seconds we could still hear in our ears the ring of her barely affected, ostentatiously kindhearted, perhaps bitter laughter.

We stopped at the gate of the bus depot. Huge buses were coming out, medium-sized buses, and teeny-tiny buses.

"Daddy-bus, mama-bus, little baby-bus," Whale laughed.

At last we came home. While Whale was eating supper and telling Mother about his walk, I was tottering around, glancing at the telephone, getting so nervous that I was at the end of my rope.

I hate that telephone! I'm always astonished to see how the wife can talk on the telephone with her friends for hours, how she can establish personal relationships with people through that telephone. Maybe her affection for her friends is transferred to the receiver, and perhaps then it is the receiver toward which she feels an attachment.

I lose a lot of time because I don't like to talk over the telephone. Instead of picking up the phone and giving a "buzz" I travel all over the city, losing

time and money. Perhaps it's because I'm looking for a life of reality, and when you hear a voice in the receiver, you think it is something imaginary, that everything is imaginary, and nothing is as it appears to be.

Perhaps that is what I ought to do now. Perhaps I shouldn't ring him tonight and instead go and talk to him tomorrow. I'll see him, look into his face and by looking into his face I'll be able to show him in a facial expression—a subtly fine facial expression—that I'm not a Humpty-Dumpty that can be easily humiliated, and I'm not a nincompoop, but a man, and that my calling on him is also a manly act, and that I can sneeze on the likes of him. On the telephone, however, he has a tremendous advantage over me—the same as talking to a supernatural power.

The telephone rang. It began to rattle, the snake. I took off the receiver. It was the voice of my so-called friend Stasik. "I'm mad at you, you're mad at me. I'm a pig, you're a pig." Stasik babbled on. …

When his spiel was finished I asked him why he had called.

"I called to tell you that you shouldn't be an ass but call up that politico immediately. I don't have to tell you how much depends on him. I saw Voynovski today and he had met Ovsyanikov who talked last night to Sadovnikov. They all think you should do it. I'll call Ovsyanikov right away and he'll get in touch with Sadovnikov, and Sadovnikov will call you back. You know Voynovski's number?"

I hung up. The receiver cradle gave a nasty click. For fifteen minutes I sat at the silent apparatus, almost able to feel in my body the telephone hullaballoo my friends were raising, and visualized those words, scurrying smoothly like mice back and forth through the cable. Finally Sadovnikov rang and promised to get in touch with Ovsyanikov who would give him Stasik's telephone number and Stasik would help him get in touch with Voynovski.

The wife entered the room. "Did you get him?" she asked.

"No answer," I lied.

"No wonder," she chided. "You're simply irresponsible." She was gone, leaving me fully distraught, confused, and that's how I was when beaming Whale came in with an armful of books.

"Want to read, Tolya?" he asked.

He had a book of poems by Marshak, another by Sapgir, as well as folk stories. We began to tackle the folk stories. Whale nestled on my lap,

listened attentively, and when the action became tense he tweaked my ear.

He snubbed the Indian story about a little elephant. When we had come to the spot where the crocodile grabs the elephant's trunk, he pulled the book out of my hands and hurled it on the floor. "It's a lie, a lie," he shouted, getting red on the face. "It's not true. It's a bad story."

"Listen, Whale," I began. "It's a good story. It ends well."

"No! No! It's bad! You read this one," he pulled out of the pile "The Wolf and the Seven Kids." My Lord, I thought, here's the same kind of dramatic tension, the terrible wolf devouring all those little kids and even though things turn out well in the end, how am I going to read it all to Whale, the little painter of reality?

In the meantime Whale had been leafing through the pages, looking at the pictures. "Here's Mama-goat," he told me, "she's bringing milk. And there the kiddy-goats, they're playing."

What an idyllic situation, and how Whale loved it! In his naive ignorance of the cannons of dramaturgy he turned over to the next page on which the ferociously painted wolf was about to devour a poor kid. I froze.

"There's Daddy-goat," Whale said, pointing to the wolf. "He's playing with the kiddy-kid."

Very calmly Whale was organizing a goat family.

"Whale, you're mistaken," I cautiously suggested. "This isn't Daddy-goat; this is the nasty grey wolf. He's about to eat up the little kid. … But don't worry, everything is going to turn out well; the wolf will be punished. This is the art of drama, my little Whale."

"No," he shouted, almost in tears. "This isn't a wolf, this is Daddy-goat —he's playing. You don't know anything, Tolya."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I was wrong," I hastily agreed. "You *are* right. This *is* the daddy-goat."

"Vanyusha," his mother called. "Time to go to sleep." He left carrying away with him into his dreams the family of heavenly bears, the little family of buses, the goat family, as well as the parasol of the "pretty auntie," the good monsters of "The World of Phantasy" and … my cap, which of course, would grow during the night to the size of an airplane and fly him to the North Pole, into the kingdom of good animals.

After settling Whale, the wife returned and sat on a chair facing me. We smoked. Usually this was a pleasant time when we smoked together at the

end of a day—not now. Now the smoke didn't taste good.

"Who was that 'auntie' Ivan mentioned to me?" my wife asked.

"She's from headquarters, a legal consultant."

"I see. What do you intend to do now?"

"I don't know."

"What is going to come out of it now?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I see," she said.

"My Lord, I wish winter would come," I thought aloud.

"What good is winter going to do?"

"My vacation comes up in winter. I'll do some skating."

"Oh, sure," she said derisively. "You're such a good skater!"

"Stop it."

"No, really. You're a first-class skater. Everybody knows it," she bit on her lip to keep from crying. I pulled up the telephone and in one stroke I dialed that damned number.

While the receiver was humming with those long, interspaced rings, I envisioned him: tossing his legs down from the couch, slowly walking up to the phone, maybe reading one of his books on the way. Maybe he was rubbing his back or the seat of his pants, maybe he was thinking—who in hell is calling? Could it be that miserable character with his asinine requests? There he was taking off the receiver.

He talked to me in a low, confidential voice, "Listen, I was told you couldn't bring yourself to call me. I've been waiting for your ring. Really, why all those fears and formalities? Obviously there was some misunderstanding. At our last meeting apparently you understood me wrong. I believe everything will result in a positive way. You may stop worrying. I'm with you all the way, with every fibre, every nerve, my heart, liver, and spleen; my dignity, honor, my loyalty, sincerity, love, and everything that is sacred to humanity, with the ideals of all generations, the axis of the earth, the solar system, the wisdom of my beloved writers and philosophers, history, geography, and botanies, the red sun, the blue sea, the seventh kingdom. … I do swear to be your faithful servant, your shield-bearer, and page."

I hung up, bathed in perspiration.

“You see,” the wife told me. “Everything is so simple, nothing to be afraid of. You only have to want it. …” She gave me a beautiful smile.

I rose, went to the bathroom, washed, and after coming into the bedroom I took a look at Whale. He was asleep; he slept like a little hero, arms and legs astraddle. His babyishness hadn’t completely disappeared yet, it was still there in his dimples and his chubby paws. He was smiling slyly in his sleep, no doubt being in the process of making some dearly funny changes in his kingdom.

I looked at him and as always my heart filled with joy, light and goodness. I felt like raising a toast to the happy life of the seven goat-kids.

1965

Fifty-Fifty

by Victor Slavkin

Victor Yosifovitch Slavkin, born in 1935, is a humorist. Graduated from the Railroad Institute in 1958, worked for the magazine The Soviet Screen *and in 1967 took over the department of humor and satire at the magazine* Yunost'. *Writes for screen, radio, and television. His story* Fifty-Fifty *was set for the screen in 1965.*

"We've got to separate," my wife and I decided. "A life of togetherness is not for us. We better part our ways and live each his own life. Each for himself."

"Just wonder how they are going to split," people asked. In fact, however, we had no trouble splitting things.

The simplest was to split the room. I took a piece of chalk and drew a nice, thick line through the middle—from wall to wall. Starting today she'd live to the right of it and I to the left. Next I split the chalk in two—one piece for me, one for her.

We didn't fool around with the books either. I got all the read volumes, she took the unread. A volume of the *Little Soviet Encyclopedia* which was left over became her property. While yielding on that point I nonetheless observed, "I read my part anyway. It's your turn now to wise up."

"And all the words starting with 'S' won't help you any," she replied.

The splitting business had worn us down a little. We sat at the table, I took the deck of cards, shuffled it and dealt. What exasperatingly miserable luck—not a single ace! She got all of them.

“So what,” I said, tossing my share of the cards into my corner, “I’ll get along without aces.”

“And you will never stop being a knucklehead,” she said, stacking up her cards on her part of the table.

Next was the turn of the table. I sawed it into two equal parts. The table had trouble standing on two legs, but I didn’t mind—those were *my* legs.

After that we took care of the television set. I obtained the rights to turn the contrast knob and the horizontal, she got the on-and-off switch, volume, and all the rest.

Gradually we split every little thing we had. At last it came to the name: Ivanov. We wrote it down on a slip of paper, tore the paper into two and put them into a hat. I closed my eyes and stuck my hand into the hat. I pulled out a slip—the last three letters! From now she will be Comrade Iva, and I, Comrade Nov.

Thus our new life had started. Next day I came home from work and lay down to relax on my part of the couch. I reached to the shelf for my favorite novel: *War and Peace*. I opened the book, and there—on the first inside page—I read: Part Two.

She had the first part!

I gingerly cleared my throat in the direction of the chalk line. “Comrade Iva,” I said, “would you mind letting me have the first volume of *War and Peace?”*

“Yes, I would,” she replied. “Even if I weren’t reading it right now.”

I turned to face the wall and began reading my own volume—from the middle.

Considerable time elapsed. A coughing and hemming started on the other side of the chalk line.

“Comrade Nov,” she uttered. “Would you mind exchanging books? I finished my half.”

“Not interested.”

“So who cares,” she said. “The movie of it will be out soon anyway. I can wait till then to see what happened.”

Then she began fiddling with the television set—on her side. I did the same on mine. There was a ballet on, *Romeo and Juliet,* our favorite program. Now, however, neither of us derived any pleasure from the show.

We became mad at ourselves and each began turning and twisting his set of knobs. Suddenly there was a snap, a crack and then—the lights went out. Mine as well as hers. Short circuit!

We were doomed to darkness because the day before we had divided the matches in the most idiotic way—the sticks to her, the boxes to me. …

I began darting from corner to corner (my corners) and she was doing the same. That was how we spent the night.

Then as the first sunrays hit the floor a terrible picture struck our eyes. The floor was covered with hundreds and hundreds of chalk tracks. And our nice, thick chalk line? Not a trace left!

"Listen, you," she said to me, "take a rag and wipe off the floor."

I was about to explode.

"… while I go to the kitchen to prepare breakfast," she concluded.

On second thought, I thought, since we've divided everything fifty-fifty why not divide our duties the same way?

I grabbed a rag.

A minute later I could smell from the kitchen the beautiful aroma of frying ham and eggs.

1965

Klara: A Painter's Tale

by Yuri Bondaryev

Yuri Vassilyevitch Bondaryev, born in 1924. During the war he served as gunner. His first short story was published in 1949. His novel On The Great River, *published in 1963, received wide acclaim in the Soviet Union. His short story* The Silence *was translated into English.*

My job makes me travel all over the country. I like to get off the train on some wooded little station, stand on the deserted platform, listen to the sighs of the locomotive moving farther and farther away into the evening, and hear the echo rolling on and on through the sleeping forest like a sound in an empty hallway.

I like to amble in a dark forest. I like to amble along an unfamiliar dusty road, listen to the noises, to the birds shouting out in their sleep, to the peeping of snipes at nearby lakes, and watch distant lights on a mountain slope, warm in the summer, but seeming to blink and quiver in the autumn night wind when Orion glows coolly in the black vortexes of the hollow-echoed lakes.

I'd usually settle down in a village for a whole summer. Every day I'd get up at dawn and wade all the day through clearings and meadows. …

I love to have night fall upon me when I'm far away from the village—somewhere at a quiet lake. I love to see the birth of night: the dense, bluish dusk crawling out of the motionless thicket of trees, the fog spreading over the water and lulling it to sleep, the reddish glow lingering on the west and glistening at the shore pebbles, the darkness moving in fast from the east, and, at last, the green stars that by now are afloat in the blackened, chilly

lake. The air becomes brisk and still. Sometimes a flock of wild ducks come whistling down by the last strip of the glow fading over the forest, and settle in the water with a soft splash.

I like to wake up on a hayloft where I usually sleep deep and sound … wake up right before daybreak and by feeling chilly know that the morning glow is about to set in. The cracks in the roof would be full of moonight, and in the predawn stillness I'd be able to hear the tireless chirping of crickets until my ears begin to ring from their clicking. The hayloft would be redolent with fragrance, a strong, dewy-fresh aroma wafting in from the orchard which would be flooded by a moon-made quivering bluish mist.

I love those scenes! Being a painter of nature I never spend the summer in town. I love the country!

One summer, however, instead of leaving for the country I had to go South to a sanatorium. I don't care for the hot South with all its decorative palms and stuffy dark nights. The South stifles me. I'm used too much to the northern woods, to the bitter-sweet scent of clover, to the dreamy bluebells in the meadows, and to the cool forest streams where sixteen-pound pikes dash their tails against the sunset-bathed surface.

The only thing I like about the South is the sea. It is an astounding spectacle! In the mornings it is pink, smooth as a pane of glass, exuding a light vapor. At noon it becomes dazzlingly blue, and by evening as it has rapidly darkened, the sunset glows flare up on the horizon where first the smokes of little white steamers fade away, then the ships themselves vanish in the flaming west.

I was pining away in the South, I was lonely without my forests. I couldn't work. …

I woke up one morning in a grouchy mood. My room was flooded with hot sun air; only a light breeze played with the white balcony curtain. I lay for some time, watching the easel on which I had a painting started of the evening sea. How little I cared this morning for the painting I'd done less than twelve hours ago! I got myself a smoke. "This won't do," I said to myself angrily. "I've got to leave for the North." And then I heard a flapping of wings and thought I saw something black and ruffled drop onto the balcony.

Puzzled, I rose and went out to have a look. A crow was sitting on the railing. It tilted its head, watching me carefully with one eye. Where did it

come from, I wondered? The sanatorium park was below and farther back was the beach and the sea.

“Why have you come here?” I asked.

The crow was not frightened. It looked at me with the other eye, shook its head and uttered a sound: “Kla-ra!” As if it wanted to get acquainted with me.

I smiled and made a few steps toward it. The crow still didn’t fly away. I reached out, the crow stretched its head toward me and I stroked it. “You there,” I said, “where have you come from?”

“Kla-ra,” was the crow’s reply. It looked at my hand and impatiently flipped its tail. I laughed and walked back to my room. “All right,” I said, “you want to come in?”

I had barely uttered my invitation when the crow hopped down from the railing, moved the curtain aside with its beak and entered the room, clattering its claws on the parquet floor. I was beyond myself from amazement. The crow suddenly skidded on the smoothly polished floor but managed to brace itself with its tail as it would have with a stick. “Kla-ra,” it cackled in annoyance.

Immediately I knew what I had to do. Quickly I got my shaving soap dish, set it on the floor, first crumbled into it some bread, then poured in some milk. The crow watched me, impatiently shaking its tail. Suddenly it pecked the floor, trying to hit a fly that had sat next to the soap dish.

“Here, eat,” I said gaily, walking aside to let my guest eat undisturbed. The crow walked up to the soap dish and began to twirl its beak in it, making milk spatter all over the floor.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Kla-ra,” the crow replied with a full beak, giving me a look of contempt —as if saying, “Come on, you know.”

“Oh, it’s Klara,” I said happily. Not asking any more questions I sat on a chair and watched my guest.

Klara finished eating, thought for a moment while scratching her head with her foot, then began pacing around the room. She saw the mirror, cawed joyously, and walked by it back and forth like a woman admiring herself. Next she noticed my bedroom slipper at the night stand, picked it up and tossed it under the bed. Finally she began dragging the soap dish toward the balcony door.

“That’s right,” I exclaimed, laughing. “Clean up the place.”

Klara glanced at me and then … she flew up onto my shoulder. I froze, not knowing what to expect next. Klara stretched out her neck, pecked me gently on my throat and began making whispering noises into my ear.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me,” I smiled sheepishly, becoming aware that Klara was pulling the strap of my pocket watch. A few seconds later it dangled, its lid sparkling in the sun. Klara began to caw excitedly, stretching her neck toward the watch, as if wanting to listen to its ticking. Her eyes, I thought, gleamed with curiosity.

Suddenly I realized what she wanted. I remembered hearing stories about crows being fond of glistening objects. In my embarrassment, not wanting to insult my guest, I swished the watch back into my pocket. Klara hopped onto my head, shifted from foot to foot, combed my hair with her beak, then began whispering into my ear again. A moment later she winged down onto the floor, walked up to the soap dish and looked back at me over her shoulder.

“Gr-rr-reat!” she cackled.

I knew she wanted to wheedle the soap dish away from me. “Wait a moment, Klara,” I argued, “how am I going to shave?”

Klara, apparently, took offense and stalked out into the balcony. I watched for some time as she flew around the park. Where has this tame crow come from? I began racking my brain. Never before had I seen a tame crow. They’d always seemed like an angry, somber kind of bird to me.

I decided to go out to the beach for a swim before breakfast. Later I lay in the warm sand, listening to the lapping of waves, to the gentle tinkle of pebbles rolled along the water line by the green sea.

In the North Klara would have never become so tame, I thought. There, in the forest expanse, in the vast fields, a crow can always find a nest somewhere on an aspen or birch. But here? And how did she ever get here?

Then I picked up a conversation between two people lying not far from me on the sand. “Don’t leave any cufflinks or watches lying around,” one was telling the other. “A terrible crow has showed up here, it steals everything. Yesterday it stole a tie pin from the fellow who sits next to me at the table.”

“They say it used to belong to a bird trainer who stayed here,” the other man said. “ He lived in room number twenty-two.”

“He left a long time ago, didn’t he?” the first man wondered.

Now I knew what Klara was doing here. Room number twenty-two was my room!

Next morning, as soon as I heard the flapping of wings on the balcony, I pulled the curtain aside and let Klara in. The same as yesterday, she politely tilted her head and allowed me to stroke her.

“Kla-ra,” she introduced herself once more.

“Pleased to meet you,” I bowed happily. “You may proceed to breakfast. Everything has been prepared for you.”

Indeed, I had been expecting Klara and prepared her breakfast. While she was eating I quickly sat down at the easel and began drawing. I enjoyed drawing her because she was in fact a denizen of the morthern woods which I missed so much here.

Klara finished her meal, flew up on my shoulder and again began whispering into my ear. Was she thanking me or trying to wheedle the soap dish away from me again? A moment later Klara hopped onto the chair in front of the easel, craned her neck, and began to study the drawing—first with one eye, then with the other, several times. Suddenly her feathers stood up, she knocked angrily against the easel with her wing, her tail began to shake furiously.

“Grr-bage,” she swore. “Rr-rascal, rr-rot!”

I felt hurt, stung by her criticism. “Why, Klara?” I asked. “Oh, go away, you know nothing of art.”

“Rr-rascal!” Klara kept swearing. She hopped down from the chair and walked up to the soap dish. Then she gave me a serious look and uttered in a voice full of enthusiasm. “Gr-rreat!”

As Klara began dragging the soap dish backwards, toward the balcony, I understood: she appreciated art in her own, different way. “Come on, Klara,” I said, smiling, “you’re right, it’s a beautiful soap dish, but I’m afraid I can’t give it to you. You see, I can’t walk around unshaven.”

Klara flew away.

I sat for a long time in front of the easel, studying the drawing. “No,” I scratched my head at last and sighed. “I’d better leave the South and go back to my woods.”

My friendship with Klara continued, however. We became fond of each other, and I missed her if she didn’t show up in the morning. I felt lonely

without her.

One evening a violent storm set in. Huge waves rolled out with the roar of shooting cannons, breaking against the rocks on top of which our sanatorium was situated, making it tremble in its foundation. The rain was coming down heavily. The park below was humming with a hollow noise. Bolts of lightning constantly slithered through the murk above the sea, and the crashing of wind-broken windowpanes kept ringing through the sanatorium.

I stood at the balcony door and watched the storm. Then a thought about Klara made me apprehensive. I was afraid she was having a hard time. When I went to bed, late, sleep wouldn't come.

Then I heard a knocking at the balcony door. I raised my head and listened. First it seemed like the wind clattering against the window, but the knocking persisted. It was a demanding kind of knocking. I jumped up, rushed to the door and opened it hastily. Together with the rain and wind that had broken into the room dashed in Klara. She was wet, ruffled, angry! She skidded several times on the floor, chattering!

"Br-rr!"

I laughed from joy, smoothed her wet feathers, trying to calm her. But Klara seemed too aroused, too angry. She was too chilled by the rain and wind, as she rattled her beak, walked from corner to corner, until at last, when I lay down, she perched on the headboard and dozed off. Only at a flash of lightning would she caw out in her sleep.

In the morning I was wakened by the chambermaid who had come into my room and brought a kitten with her. The moment Klara saw it she jealously dashed up to the animal and pecked it on the head. The kitten meowed pitiously and scampered out, its ears pressed to its head.

"Rr-rascal!" Klara chattered. "Ss-such rr-rascal!" Apparently she didn't care for cats.

I scolded my pet for her rudeness. But Klara quieted down only after she walked up to the soap dish. "Gr-reat!" she cawed.

A few days later came my time to leave. In the morning Klara had her breakfast as usual, and kept begging me for the soap dish, affectionately pinching my ear. I sadly looked at my suitcases. I had been considering taking Klara with me but didn't know how I could bring a bird to Moscow. Klara seemed to understand that I was leaving; she tried to overwhelm me

with affection. She had had her breakfast, but instead of leaving, as usual, she clambered onto my head, beakcombed my hair. I took her onto my hand, and for the first time, I noticed how fast her heart beat. “So long, Klara,” I said, setting her in front of me on the table, “I’ve got to leave.”

“Ss-sad,” Klara said, tenderly pressing my finger with her beak. “Ss-sad!”

I was moved. “You want to go with me?” I asked. “Want to go North?”

Klara made no reply.

I sighed, picked up my suitcases, then remembered something. I got out my soap dish and a pair of old cufflinks and left them on the balcony.

Klara hadn’t budged. She sat beside the suitcases, watching me with her wise, black eyes.

“Well,” I said, “your understanding of art is one-sided. Take the things out there, they’re yours.”

I came down the staircase, into the vestibule. Klara followed me, hop, hop, one step at a time.

At the door the kitten was about to join me but an angry look from Klara made it flinch and break away in fear.

I stroked Klara for the last time before getting into the bus. She flew up onto a palm tree and watched me in silence.

“So long, Klara,” I said, waving goodbye before turning away.

“Ss-so rr-rong!” Klara replied.

Later other passengers told me that Klara had been flying behind the bus for quite some time, cawing and cawing. …

1966

The House Guest

by Anatoli Rubinov

Anatoli Zakharovitch Rubinov, born 1934 and graduated from the Moscow POLygraph Institute in 1958. Worked with many newspapers and presently employed with Literaturnaya Gazeta. *Published a book* Friends Are Everywhere *in 1959, as well as a number of short stories in various magazines.*

The door opened and there she stood—a young woman in a long housecoat with a Turkish towel carelessly wrapped around her head.

"Valentina Ivanovna?" she repeated. "That's me."

Her admission was indecisive. She gave him a baffled look while her hands holding up the lapels of her housecoat cautiously rested on her throat.

"I'm a friend of Georgi Bakanov," Andrey hastily got out an unsealed envelope from his pocket. "Here's a letter from him. For you …"

She seemed taller and prettier than the way he had pictured her from his friend's description. It made him a little bashful.

The woman took the envelope and began reading. "But why am I keeping you on the porch?" she suddenly exclaimed. "Come on in."

With an eager hustle she took his suitcase, put it in a corner, then took his overcoat. "Take a shower, please, don't be bashful. Then we'll have tea …"

While Andrey washed, Valentina Ivanovna changed, made tea, and set the table. Tall, statuesque, she moved lightly about the room. Later, watching him from across the table, she kept pelting him with questions.

"Did he get his degree?"

“Yes. Now Georgi is not only *doing* an engineer’s job, he’s a real one.”

“Oh, how happy I am for him. You cannot imagine. He’s quite a fellow.”

Andrey could readily see the happiness sparkling in her huge greyish-green eyes.

“But why hasn’t he written me? I was so worried. But tell me, did he get a flat?”

“That worked out all right, too. He’s got two rooms now. Plenty of space for the three of them.”

“The three?” Valentina Ivanovna’s question came after a moment of silence.

Andrey blushed. He knew he had blabbed. She walked away to the dressing table and lifted her hands to her hair with a slow, tired motion. Her back was turned, but he could see her face in the mirror. She sighed—a repressed kind of sigh, and her fingers pensively kneaded her squeaking, humid hair.

“Why do people lie to each other so often and so much?” she asked in a low voice without turning around, as if talking to herself. “Is it because of cowardice or just convenience? Nothing destroys hope like lying …”

Gripped by a sensation of desperate awkwardness, Andrey realized he had involuntarily become a witness to someone else’s secret and someone else’s grief. Only now did he begin to recognize the sarcasm in Georgi’s words as he had handed him the letter for Valentina Ivanovna: “Don’t be bashful, she’ll put you up. She’s kind …”

She willingly consented to have Andrey live in her flat for about a week as Georgi Bakanov asked in his letter, since he had no friends in Moscow, and to get a room in a hotel in the summer was well-nigh impossible. Andrey thought he somehow had to reciprocate unobtrusively for her candor and friendliness but his shyness and tact muddled his thinking. Should he offer her money? From the surroundings he saw that she lived modestly (that phonograph creaking with age!). No, that might quite offend her. Should he bring food for dinner? That made even less sense. He decided to invite her to the movies—like all Muscovites she probably seldom went to movies or museums.

Under a pretense Andrey went downtown, window-shopped a little, all the time wondering about her. At last he came hurrying home, full of determination.

“I got two tickets to the movies. Would you like to go with me, Valentina Ivanovna?”

“I’ll be glad to,” she said simply, without hesitation.

“Let’s hurry,” he said, afraid she’d change her mind. “We’ll be late.”

They returned home late. The humping crest of the Bolshoi Kamennoi Bridge was almost deserted. At rare intervals a trolley car would speed by like a demon sputtering bluish sparks. It was a warm evening though a cool breeze came up from the river. Hanging between the shores above the water the darkness, pierced by lamp lights, seemed volatile and somehow transparent, as if with a stronger breeze it would evanesce like a dark mist.

To the left somewhere far away and high glowed the lights of the university building, towering above the river. From the Alexandrow Park wafted a faint aroma of poplars.

Andrey inhaled with pleasure the redolence which made him slightly dizzy. Gingerly he held Valentina’s arm without feeling at all awkward about it.

“I’ve travelled through a lot of towns,” he said, pressing her elbow a little harder, “and everywhere I either liked the place or disliked it depending on how people treated me and how comfortable I felt there.”

Valentina Ivanovna turned her head and look at him intensely.

“It’s true,” he assured her ardently. “Take another town. It looks beautiful, all in flowers, music in all the parks, but you’re alone and homeless. Often hotels have no room and with no friends you end up by sleeping in an office on some slippery couch or in the waiting room of a railroad station.”

“Really?” Valentina Ivanovna found it hard to believe. “I always thought, knock at any door and they’ll take you in.”

“If it were only like that!” Andrey laughed, amused at her naiveté. “But Moscow is different,” he added. “I like it very much here. I’m at home here.”

At home she made his bed on the couch. Sleep didn’t come, however. Objects began to stand out in the darkness; the cupboard, then the screen behind which was Valentina Ivanovna’s bed. From time to time the room suddenly glowed up with a restless moving light—of cars going by. The illuminated square of the window dissected by the frame would first fall with an arched angle onto the ceiling and part of the wall, then rush through

the room and merge with the shadows on the opposite side. For a flashing moment the mirror would flare up and the varnished cupboard shimmer eerily.

It seemed Valentina Ivanovna wasn't asleep either. Her breathing was heavy—she might have been crying.

The following days went by quickly. As long as his hostess was at work, Andrey spent his time at the Exposition, at the Tretyakov Gallery, and even foraged a ticket for the Armory show. In the evenings, though, they went to the movies, then stopped for ice cream. She began to perk up and often smiling sadly she'd tell him willingly about herself. He'd not interrupt although her story might have been familiar here and there from Georgi. Georgi's name was never mentioned again—as if it didn't exist.

Valentina Ivanovna's personal story wasn't a happy one, as it often is with pretty and sensible women. Destiny had seemed to have plenty of fortune in store for her, but luck never came. She had been employed as a telephone operator in the Central Telegraph office when she married a superintendent at the Kuzminski construction works. Her girlfriends had been envious and she too had been proud of herself and of her pick. But soon enough, to her horror, she found out that her husband was an alcoholic.

He'd come home late, his attractive features spread into an ugly mask, his lower lip drooping, his eyes turned into two hazy little buttons, frightening, as if unseeing. He'd not undress but sit down sidewise at the table and try to prop his chin on his elbow, and his hand would keep slipping off and knock against the corner of the table. "Why're ya grinning?" he'd yell at her in rage. "Why're ya so happy? Just wait'n I'll leave ya. Yah. Or chase ya out. Just stamp ma foot 'n out you go. 'N get lost —what'll ya do then, huh?"

What would often follow was drunk raving: what an excellent worker he was, how the management was eating from his hand and how he was pulling strings at his will. He'd interrupt his raving from time to time, scream insults at her, curse and rebuke her.

For a year or so she had tried to save her marriage. She'd patiently try to convince her husband to "get hold of himself and be a man." To no avail. Finally she had decided to leave him. He, too, had disappeared then. Shortly thereafter she had given birth to a baby girl who became her only solace in

life. However, pneumonia took the child away. Valentina was alone in the world when she had met Georgi Bakanov …

Full of sympathetic understanding, Andrey listened attentively, his eyes glued on the young woman. How painfully he would have loved to do something to make her life easier and happier. But what? How can one relieve such grief?

He excused himself, put on his coat and hurried out before she had time to ask where and why he was going. Half an hour later he came running back into the flat, eager and puffing, with a cake and bouquet, or rather, an armful of bright aromatic flowers.

Sternly knitting her brows and disapprovingly shaking her head, Valentina Ivanvona said, "You won't have anything left to go home with. You're crazy."

Still her eyes sparkled with joy and the corner of her mouth rose to a smile. "Where shall I put them?" Unexpectedly she kissed him on the forehead. "Thank you," she whispered.

She began bustling with the flowers. Two vases and a pitcher came out of the cupboard, but there were so many flowers that some of them were simply left on the table. The room filled with a thick, intoxicating aroma.

On the eve of his departure they stayed home. There was a long silence as the two of them sat on the couch. Valentina watched the darkness thicken, fearful yet helpless to get up and turn on the light. Sitting beside this man, really a stranger, she felt comfortable and yet uneasy. He seemed shy, still he was attentive. Sitting farther from the window, she could see his profile, watch him hold his breath. His hand excitedly caressed hers and lifted it gingerly to his lips. She let him.

A car went by and the square of light flitted through the room and glided along the two of them, showing fear and expectation in her humid eyes. Assisted by a spurt of determination she rose. "Excuse me, please. I think I left the gas on," she said, leaving the room.

The first day he came home, Andrey met Georgi Bakanov.

"Well, what's new, Andryusha? Satisfied?" Georgi's questioning look was full of gay suspicion.

"Yeah, everything is all right," Andrey didn't feel like talking.

“I mean Valentina. Come on tell me how she received you. Did she ask about me? She’s great, though, isn’t she? And kind. Most important, she’s kind …”

They had been sitting in the lunchroom. Colleagues from the construction office came to their table. In the welcome hullabaloo, answering questions about his trip and Moscow, Andrey hadn’t noticed the innuendo at first. When he did he blushed.

He’d thought of a riposte when Georgi concluded, “On the other hand, all broads’re the same. Knew it all the time. Andrey, you’re as quick as they come …”

For a moment Andrey remained stupefied. A weak smile came to his face, as if brought on by embarassment or guilt. Georgi couldn’t make it out; he attributed it to discretion.

Without realizing it, Andrey couldn’t stop thinking of Valentina—he often caught himself doing so. Those bluish sparks of the trolley on the Bolshoi Kamennoi Bridge, the aroma of poplars from the Alexandrov Park, the reflection of lights in the water, and the floating framework square of the window. He remembered Moscow as a huge beautiful world in whose center was Valentina Ivanovna. Here and there, everything around him was full of Valentina. He’d have to write her, no ifs or buts—such an acquaintance must not slip into oblivion.

Entering the office next morning, he met Georgi. With him was a new colleague, Oleg, a young fellow just graduated from the institute who got Moscow as his first assignment. Georgi was heatedly trying to convince Oleg about something. He called for Andrey’s assistance.

“Well, tell him, Andryusha, don’t be bashful. Isn’t it true? Take your suitcase direct to Starokonyushenny, get out at the Kropotkinskaya Metro station and it’s right there. She’s a great woman! And very, very kind,” Georgi winked knowingly at Andrey.

Oleg blushed slightly, then uttered a loud, stupid laugh.

And then it happened: the stooping, narrow-shouldered Andrey unswervingly shot a fist out upward and hit Georgi on the face with all its might. Andrey wanted to reinforce his act by words, but on second thought he shot out his left fist and hit again, even harder.